Table of Contents

1. Ch. 1
2. Ch. 2
3. Ch. 2
4. Ch. 3
5. Ch. 4
6. Ch. 5
7. Ch. 6
8. Ch. 7
9. Ch. 8
10. Ch. 9
11. Ch. 10
12. Ch. 11
13. Ch. 12
14. Ch. 13
15. Ch. 14
16. Ch. 15
17. Ch. 16
18. Ch. 17
19. Ch. 18
20. Ch. 19
21. Ch. 20
22. Ch. 21
23. Ch. 22
24. Ch. 23
25. Ch. 24
26. Ch. 25
27. Ch. 26
28. Ch. 27
29. Ch. 28
30. Ch. 29
31. Ch. 30
32. Ch. 31
33. Ch. 32
34. Ch. 33

35. Ch. 34
36. Ch. 35
37. Ch. 36
38. Ch. 37
39. Ch. 38
40. Ch. 39
41. Ch. 40
42. Ch. 41
43. Ch. 42
44. Ch. 43
45. Ch. 44
46. Ch. 45
47. Ch. 46
48. Ch. 47
49. Ch. 48
50. Ch. 49
51. Ch. 50
52. Ch. 51
53. Ch. 52
54. Ch. 53
55. Ch. 54
56. Ch. 55
57. Ch. 56
58. Ch. 57
59. Ch. 58

Ch. 1

Darkness. Echoes. Silence.

Heartpaw blinked his eyes open. His body ached. Everything ached. His mind ached. He should be in StarClan. He was probably in StarClan. Why did StarClan seem so... different? Definitely not what he had seen in the dreams. He was in a quiet den of dirt and big comfortable moss bed. He sniffed. The smells were wild, but he liked it. He smiled. Maybe being in StarClan was better. Looking around, he realised on the strong scent of herbs and saw them arranged nicely around him. A light brown, tabby cat padded in. He was probably from StarClan as well.

"How did you die?" blurted Heartpaw. It was the first thing which had come into mind and the cat gave him a weird look. Another cat appeared. He was dark cream coloured.

"No, he's delusional," grumbled the cream coloured cat. The other cat narrowed his eyes but didn't say anything.

"I'm in StarClan, right?" Heartpaw clarified, staring at the strangers confusedly.

"No child," said the tabby cat gently, as if he had some sort of mental problem. "You are definitely not in StarClan." Heartpaw sighed.

"Oh," said Heartpaw slightly disappointed. This meant he was very much alive and had to face the reality of life. He grunted and huffed.

"Aren't you going to ask where you are?" said the cream cat.

"No," said Heartpaw. He shrugged. He honestly didn't care. He had no more Clan. His Clan hated him. His *family* threw him out. Anywhere was better than ShadowClan.

"Well I'll tell you anyways," put in the tabby cat. "You're in WindClan. In the medicine den actually. I'm Addertail. And this grumpy cat is Marshtail."

"Deputy," clarified Marshtail. Addertail rolled his eyes.

"You're lucky I was on the patrol with the others, collecting herbs, they were going to drag you into the middle of the Thunderpath," said Addertail.

"Hmph," grunted Marshtail. "We should have left him on the Thunderpath. Doesn't look like he has any will to live anyways."

"Marshtail, why are you here anyways?" sighed Addertail. "We're just going to talk to him. Y'know, maybe we'll end up chasing him out anyways." Marshtail grunted and stalked out. Heartpaw watched the medicine cat carefully. He had never imagined WindClan like this. He had imagined the, living out in the moor or always running about. He realised suddenly Ivypaw was in WindClan and his interest flared up. Ivypaw... He imagined her light tabby pelt and soft eyes. Her sweet smile and mostly, her laughter and the way she could make him laugh. He remembered how good it felt, to just laugh his heart out with her. All their night time meetings. When she had crossed the border to ShadowClan or sometimes he had crossed to WindClan.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Addertail, breaking Heartpaw from his thoughts.

"Nothing," mumbled Heartpaw.

"Everybody is always thinking about something," pointed out Addertail and sat facing Heartpaw. "Why were you lying on our side of the border ShadowClan cat?" Heartpaw hesitated. There was no good way of saying he had been banished.

"They threw me out," Heartpaw finally said.

"Ah. But you're just an apprentice, is that right?" said Addertail. Heartpaw wondered if WindClan knew about Ivypaw and him, ShadowClan certainly did. Maybe Lionbreeze - the

ShadowClan medicine cat who hated Heartpaw - had told Addertail.

"Yeah, I'm Heartpaw," mumbled Heartpaw.

"Ah yes, Pinestar mentioned you in one of the Gatherings," Addertail nodded. Heartpaw's thought flitted to the old and wise leader. His former mentor. He had died when Heartpaw had been gone, in isolation to be exact. The last time Heartpaw had seen him was when Pinestar had banished him. It was not a good memory.

"But he passed away, didn't he?" Addertail continued.

"Yeah."

"So Cinderstar banished you." Addertail concluded. "What did you do?"

"I don't want to talk about it," grunted Heartpaw.

"We took you in. The least you can do is explain," Addertail said firmly.

"You should have just left me," grumbled Heartpaw.

"You were in our border," pointed out Addertail.

"Then you should have put me on the Thunderpath," bristled Heartpaw.

"But we didn't."

"Yeah, and it was your choice. I didn't ask to be here."

"And I'm assuming you didn't ask to be banished either."

"Correct." Heartpaw and Addertail lapsed into silence. Finally Addertail stood up.

"You seem fine. No serious injuries I couldn't fix," he

said and padded out. He must be a horrible medicine cat, thought Heartpaw. His whole body ached and his head was pounding. He was left with only his thoughts for a while until a dark tabby cat padded in. Fawnstar. Fawnstar looked Heartpaw from tail to ear then turned to Addertail.

"Heartpaw is it?" Fawnstar said but didn't wait for an answer. "What are we to do with you?" She seemed to be talking to himself. Marshtail slipped next to Fawnstar, glaring at Heartpaw.

"We should throw him out," Marshtail said.

"Yes, I've done all I can, he's in good health," Addertail agreed, "mostly." Heartpaw rolled his eyes. At this point, he didn't care about his fate, only Ivypaw... maybe.

"He's still an apprentice," pointed out Fawnstar.

"But he was banished. His own Clan didn't want him, why should we?" pointed out Marshtail. Heartpaw felt an anger rise through him and he barred his fangs and bristled. Marshtail just narrowed his eyes at him.

"We will give him shelter for tonight and he will go hunting for food with our patrol, leaving soon. Tomorrow, he leaves," Fawnstar announced and beckoned Heartpaw. Heartpaw slowly got to his feet. He stumbled to the entrance of the den after Fawnstar. He looked around, trying to take everything in. The sudden sun and brightness blinded him for a moment. He was led to the entrance of the camp. There, four warriors and an apprentice stood. Heartpaw's eyes almost dropped out. Not just any apprentice. Ivypaw. She looked at him with no emotion then turned to who, Heartpaw guessed, was her mentor.

"Take him on hunting patrol," ordered Fawnstar. "Ivypaw will stay with him." Ivypaw seemed to object but Thornstar padded away. Just then, a bright ginger cat skidded to a halt in front of the patrol. He eyed Heartpaw.

"who's this?" he asked loudly. A white warrior with a black patch on her forehead replied, "Heartpaw. From

ShadowClan. He's staying one more night." The apprentice narrowed his eyes.

"Relax Firepaw, it's *one* night," snapped a black warrior, Firepaw's mentor. She turned to Heartpaw.

"I'm Nightwing," she said. "This is Firepaw, as you know. And Rainfur, Ravenfall, Sunpelt and Ivypaw." Rainfur was the white she-cat with the black patch on her head, Ravenfall was a dark brown cat with a pelt which glistened and beady eyes. Sunpelt was a sleek cream coloured cat and Ivypaw..., she was just beautiful. Heartpaw followed the patrol out with Firepaw grumbled and complaining about having a ShadowClan cat. Although Nightwing snapped at Firepaw to shut up, nobody stopped him from insulting Heartpaw. He knew they didn't feel any friendlier to him. Ivypaw didn't even glance at him. It was as if they didn't know each other. Finally, they stood up in front of the moor. It stretched out forever. The wind was unrelenting and strong but it felt wild and good on Heartpaw's pelt. He was glad it wasn't snowing. The patrol split into groups and Ivypaw was put with Heartpaw. She was told to lead him and try to help him. When the other cats were gone and Ivypaw was left alone with Heartpaw, Ivypaw quickly slipped into the tall grasses and searched for any signs of prey. Heartpaw trotted after her, making the grasses rustle. She glared at him.

"You're making too much noise," she scolded in a hushed tone. He looked at her sheepishly. Finally, after a while of Heartpaw trying to be silent and not managing, Ivypaw came to a stop and faced him.

"What do you want? To talk to me? There's nothing to say. You told me to go away, I left. And that's that," bristled Ivypaw.

"What do you mean?" cried Heartpaw. "I never told you to leave." Ivypaw gave him a meaningful look.

"Look, my Clan don't know and I'd like to keep it that way," she told him.

"Yeah, well my whole Clan knows and now I'm banished," Heartpaw said, not telling the whole truth. His isolation had been for seeing a WindClan cat but the banishment had been for leading rogues to ShadowClan which had resulted in the death of a young warrior, Spottedwhisker.

"You got banished because of us meeting?" Ivypaw said.

"Yeah-ish."

"Well..., it was never supposed to happen alright? How about we keep it the way it was, when you told me to leave that night when that medicine cat attacked you."

"I didn't want to get you into trouble!"

"Whatever. Let's just hunt alright? You're leaving tomorrow anyways."

"But what if I stayed. What if I stayed her, joined WindClan."

"That's not going to happen."

"We could have kits."

"Um..."

"Ok, that's a bit much but we could be friends, well a bit more than friends."

"No Heartpaw. Don't you get it? It's over. It was never meant to happen. Now it's over. You have no more Clan because of it! For StarClan's sake."

"Yeah I have no more Clan which sucks but now I have somebody. I have you."

"No Heartpaw." Ivypaw turned away. Heartpaw knew it was final. But he still loved her. He suddenly felt it, deep in his heart. It was the feeling of longing and not wanting to let go. He

couldn't wrap his mind around the thought that Ivypaw had slipped away. Suddenly, a cat poked his head out of the grasses, bright green eyes held his stare. Then the apprentice growled.

"Oh hi Firepaw," muttered Heartpaw. Firepaw narrowed his eyes and stalked away. Heartpaw searched for Ivypaw and finally saw her. She was crouched down and keeping low to the ground. He waited behind, whiskers twitching. He suddenly heard it. A rabbit. Suddenly, the creature burst out and sprinted towards Heartpaw. Ivypaw leapt and her claws scratched its side but it kept running. Heartpaw pelted after the animal. He felt more alive than ever. The wind blew in his face. His paws were running under him, faster than he ever thought possible. His ears were flat on his back and the wind whipped his face. But it seemed on his side. Urging him on. He finally got near enough to reached out his unsheathed claws and touched the rabbit's little tail. He gave one last burst of speed and caught the rabbit in his paws. He dug his claws into it and tumbled to the ground. He bit into its neck and shook himself as he slowly got up. Ivypaw walked to him, her eyes dull. She frowned.

"Good job," she said slightly annoyed. Heartpaw couldn't help but smile. But she turned away and flicked her tail at him. "I'm not changing my mind. Heartpaw, it's over. Not only is it over, it never happened. You and I. It. Never. Happened." Heartpaw's heart dropped.

Ch. 2

Heartpaw gazed at the small mouse in front of his paws. He looked around, cats watched him with judging and cold looks. Although nobody started a fight with him, he felt shunned. He took a small bite of the mouse and cringed. From behind, a cat moved.

"Eat the miserable thing already," a harsh voice came. Heartpaw turned around to see a dark grey cat with mottled fur.

"Sorry," mumbled Heartpaw.

"Ain't nothing to be sorry about," the old cat assured. "Longpelt, a proud elder of WindClan." Heartpaw forced a small smile.

"So you're ShadowClan, eh?" said Longpelt. Heartpaw nodded. "Staying one night?"

"Yes," agreed Heartpaw. "I mean, I don't know how long I stayed before that."

"Two days and a night."

"Oh ok. Thanks."

"You seem sad." Heartpaw couldn't help but chuckle.

"Yeah. Sorta," he answered.

"You shouldn't be. You've got no Clan," the old cat coughed.

"Yeah I know. Thanks for reminding me," grumbled Heartpaw. Maybe all the WindClan cats were the same afterall.

"Hey, I didn't finish," grunted Longpelt. "I'm old. Let me take me time. I was saying.. You've got no Clan, you should be glad. You're free. An old cat like me, I regret my choices. I wish i could've

traveled the world, seen many things. But I'm too old now. You've got the opportunity. Go for it." Heartpaw frowned. He thought about walking away from the Clans. Seeing new things. Things no Clan cat had ever seen. It didn't give him a shiver of excitement, it sparked nothing in him except faint disinterest. He didn't want to see the world. He liked his life. He just wanted to be a warrior.

"Don't please you?" Longpelt said. Heartpaw shook his head. "Oh well, to each their own." Heartpaw nodded and gulped down the skinny mouse quickly.

"Thanks for the talk," he thanked Longpelt and dipped his head before trotting away. Fawnstar padded up to him. She had a distracted look.

"You may sleep in the apprentice's den tonight. Tomorrow, you leave with the dawn border patrol," Fawnstar told him. Heartpaw nodded. She seemed in a hurry to get rid of him.

"Thanks," Heartpaw mumbled finally. Fawnstar, who had started to walk away, turned back. "For everything."

"Don't thank me. I didn't want to drag you here. Thank Addertail," Fawnstar replied without emotion and walked off. Heartpaw padded to the apprentice den where he heard some talking. He recognised Ivypaw's voice. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, opened his eyes once more and stepped into the den. It was slightly dark and his eyes took some time to adjust. He looked around. The walls were covered in moss and ivy. The walls were of uneven rock and the ground was soft soil. Big moss beds were spread around. Ivypaw didn't turn to him. Only Firepaw, another greyish cat, a ginger cat and a tortoiseshell cat.

"Hi," said Heartpaw awkwardly, not looking at Ivypaw. He knew she didn't want him to talk to her. She was avoiding him and she had told him specifically not to bother her anymore. He would respect her decision. Firepaw glared at him and lashed his tail.

"Hi *ShadowClan* cat," Firepaw said. The tortoiseshell cat stepped forward.

"You're not sleeping in this den, are you?" he asked.

"Yeah," Heartpaw replied. The tortoiseshell cat huffed and slid into his nest. The ginger cat smiled.

"He's only staying a night. And he's not ShadowClan anymore. We can at least be nice for a night," she said. "I'm Applepaw. That one is Firepaw, that's Ivypaw, that's Berrypaw." Berrpyaw, the tortoiseshell grimaced.

"And Mintpaw," Applepaw finished. Heartpaw nodded.

"Great, um nice meeting you," he said.

"you too. Here take this nest," said Applepaw. Berrypaw grunted.

"Seems like Applepaw has found a new mate," he taunted.

"They're going to have half-Clan kits," added Mintpaw, his voice sweet but his words harsh. Firepaw burst into laughter. Heartpaw had remembered Ivypaw talking about Firepaw being annoying but she hadn't mentioned Berrypaw and Mintpaw being annoying either. As he recalled, she had even said Mintpaw was nice or something along those lines.

"Hey, apprentices!" came a voice. "The patrols are being made, your mentors want you." The apprentices herded out. The warrior stopped Ivypaw. "Galestrike told me you already have been assigned on patrol. You don't need to come." Ivypaw nodded and returned to her nest. Heartpaw slipped into the nest which Applepaw had motioned for her. He gazed at Ivypaw but quickly looked away. They both rested silently, each aware of the awkwardness levels rising.

"I'm sorry," Heartpaw finally said, not expecting Ivypaw to make any sign of listening and fully expecting her to ignore him. "For everything." Seconds crawled.

"Me too," Ivypaw finally replied. Heartpaw felt relief flooding through him. "But it never happened, remember? I like

Mintpaw." Heartpaw couldn't stop himself, he snapped around to her. He looked at her, his brow furrowed.

"What?" he said. She huffed and flicked her tail in dismissal.

"Don't be surprised. Come on, I thought you had moved on, yelling at me to go and all-" Ivypaw started but Heartpaw cut in.

"For the last time, I didn't mean go forever and I didn't mean it badly. I didn't want you to get into trouble," Heartpaw protested.

"Yeah well, I thought you had moved on. And if you didn't, I have," Ivypaw said. She turned away from Heartpaw. "Good night." Heartpaw forced himself to peel his eyes off her and closed them.

Heartpaw looked around. The sky was cloudy as if rain was about to start falling. The ground was soft and muddy. The grass wet. No, it had just finished raining. He looked around. To the end of his vision, stretched the moor. Short blades of grass growing everywhere. He turned fully around, looking at the grey sky around him. Suddenly, he spotted her. Brightheart. His mother. He felt his heart leap. He smiled. He ran up to her and pressed his head to hers. She was warm. He closed his eyes, feeling comfort, safety, love.

"Dear Heartpaw," she murmured softly, gazing at hi with round beautiful and loving eyes.

"Brightheart," he smiled.

"I'm sorry for everything which has happened," she told him. He looked down. The fur on her feet were dirty with wet mud. She looked down where his gaze lingered on her dirty paws.

"Remember what I told you? About rain?" she said.

"Yes," Heartpaw nodded.

"If Stormpelt hadn't named you. I would've named you

Rainkit," she purred. Heartpaw smiled. He was starting to get to know his mother better.

"What did you want to tell me?" asked Heartpaw. Brightheart smiled and looked around.

"Why are you in a rush, Heartpaw?" she said. She sat down on the cold floor. Heartpaw followed. A soft breeze blew, ruffling his fur.

"I don't know... I'm not," he said.

"Don't rush things. You won't have enough time to appreciate them. Take your time," she said warmly.

"I'm sorry, I'm not - rushing. I just, I just wanted to know if you wanted to tell me something," Heartpaw sighed. "I'd stay here with you forever." Brightheart beamed.

"That time will come. But you still have life in you. You will live it to your fullest," she said. "You're my son. I'll be watching you, and I'll be proud."

"How are you talking to me?" Heartpaw gaped.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not ShadowClan."

"You might not belong to a Clan for now but I'm still watching over you. StarClan watched over all Clans, even WindClan." Heartpaw thought, I'm not WindClan either.

"Brightheart, how can you be proud of me, when I've messed everything up?" Heartpaw asked.

"How dear? How have you messed up?" Brightheart said.

"I met a WindClan cat secretly, brought rogues to my Clan and my Clanmate was killed. Because of me," Heartpaw said.

"Did you kill Spottelwhisker?" asked Brightheart.

"I led the rogues to her," Heartpaw said.

"They killed her. And she's here now, with us. She doesn't blame you. You shouldn't either."

"ShadowClan blames me."

"You're not ShadowClan anymore."

"But why are you telling me this? Acting as if you don't like ShadowClan. You were ShadowClan."

"I never said I didn't like ShadowClan. I'm saying, sometimes they're wrong."

"But they're not wrong. I was wrong."

"Well, you've got your punishment. And now, you're going to go out there and live your life at the fullest. I'll be proud of you no matter what. I'll watch over you, no matter what. I'll be proud of you no matter what."

"Even if I mess up?"

"Even if you become a kittypet."

"Ugh," grumbled Heartpaw, he grimaced. "Don't worry, definitely not." Brightheart laughed.

"Just know," Brightheart said, as if they were her parting words. "Everything happens for a reason." Heartpaw watched as Brightheart disappeared. Great StarClan, why did they always have to do that? He watched as the moor slowly dissolved in front of him. He looked down at his paws and looked around. He was engulfed my darkness. But he was peaceful.

Ch. 2

Heartpaw jolted awake. A small ray of daylight filtered into the apprentice den. He looked around at the snoring apprentices around him. Firepaw was the only one not snoring which came to a surprise to Heartpaw and he snickered. He got up quietly and slipped to the den entrance, peering out. The camp was quiet except a few cats near the fresh-kill pile or talking quietly. Heartpaw looked back at Ivypaw for the last time. *Everything happens for a reason.* His mother's voice echoed in his head. He gazed at Ivypaw, sleeping peacefully. Maybe he was supposed to have ended up on WindClan territory. Maybe this had been his chance to say his final goodbye to the first cat he loved, and still did. He closed his eyes then opened them again and took a step out of the apprentice den. He didn't have to look back into the past. Nothing would be the same again. And maybe for the better. He spotted Fawnstar the camp entrance and quickly trotted over to her. A few cats gathered around. The sun was slowly starting to rise. Fawnstar nodded to Heartpaw and the patrol of cats and walked off.

"I know you," growled a white cat. Cloverwish.

"Yeah, me too," Heartpaw said. Cloverwish lashed her tail and slunk out of the WindClan camp. A black and white tom beckoned me to follow. Behin him was a calico cat. He had scars all over his face.

"Where will you bring me?" asked Heartpaw.

"Fawnstar said, not to ShadowClan. So to ThunderClan and RiverClan border," explained the black and white tom.

"What's your name?" asked Heartpaw finally, seeing that the tom had not wanted to indulge anything about himself.

"Webcall," said the cat after a moment of silence, he nodded to the calico cat who had kept his head down. "This is Larchsplash. And you seem to know Cloverwish." Heartpaw nodded.

They trotted down the moor. The wind blew freely, ruffling Heartpaw's fur. They made it to the ThunderClan border near the RiverClan border. Webcall nodded for Heartpaw to leave. He nodded and slipped away without a word. He looked side to side. A long Thunderpath stretched out on both sides. He looked both ways, listened and quickly crossed. He was on RiverClan territory. He looked back. Webcall was watching him but the other cats had started marking the border. He turned around and gazed into the RiverClan territory. He didn't know what he was going to do next, he hadn't even thought about joining another Clan, but he had to now, he couldn't be Clanless forever. He hoped he wouldn't be Clanless forever. He looked around. The trees were bare and the ground was frozen and cold. He heard the rushing of water a bit further off. He advanced towards it, hopefully towards RiverClan camp. He had never been to RiverClan, never seen RiverClan. ShadowClan and RiverClan borders didn't touch so they never had any big battles together. Heartpaw looked around. RiverClan had smaller trees than ShadowClan which were much more spread out. Finally, he found the river. It was the largest and widest river he had ever seen. The water rushed quickly, he wondered if it could ever freeze. It seemed always in movement. He bent down to touch the water but thought better of it, thinking of Briarkit. He looked around. The sky was grey. He walked along the river, hoping he was going towards RiverClan territory. Suddenly, he heard voices. He stopped and pricked his ears. Some cats were coming his direction. He waited. Finally, two apprentices came to view. He waited patiently, twitching with anticipation. The apprentices stopped and stared at him then they both pounded towards him. When they were nearer, Heartpaw saw that one of them was dark grey and the other was pale brown.

"What are you doing here? Rogue!" hissed the grey one. They both looked smaller than Heartpaw but he didn't want to start a fight. He wanted to talk to RiverClan..., maybe he could join them. He had never had a quarrel with RiverClan. He needed to join another Clan..., he didn't want to become a rogue or kittypet. He needed to have another chance in life. The pale cat sniffed him.

"He smells like ShadowClan. And WindClan," she said. They grey cat frowned.

"He can't be *both*!" cried the grey cat. "He's come to invade our camp!" The pale brown she-cat rolled her eyes.

"Of course not! He's just an apprentice," she said. "What do you want?"

"I um. I want to talk to your leader," said Heartpaw.

"Why?" asked the grey cat.

"Because, um I want to join RiverClan," as Heartpaw said it, he realised how absurd the idea was and almost retreated but the pale brown cat nodded.

"Why are you nodding?" the grey cat accused. The she-cat glared at him.

"Because we need more cats, you know we don't have many wa-" she started.

"Don't tell him!" growled the grey cat. "Follow us." Heartpaw followed them up river and then turned right. Finally, they got to RiverClan camp and slipped through a tunnel. Heartpaw found himself in a camp surrounded by plants and bushes. The ground was dirt. He looked around. The cats in the clearing looked up. A few growled and hissed. A murmur of confusion ran up. A dark tabby cat padded up to them.

"Eelpaw, Minkpaw, what is the meaning of this?" demanded the dark tabby cat. Heartpaw recognised him. Thorntstar. He quickly jumped in, hoping not to get the apprentices, perhaps his future Clanmates, in trouble. Cats milled around, trying to eavesdrop.

"I'm Heartpaw," said Heartpaw, forcing a smile. Thornstar narrowed his eyes. He unsheathed his claws and Heartpaw took a step back. "I'm er.. I wanted to ask you if I could er... join RiverClan." Murmurs of shock rang out. Heartpaw wanted to sink into the ground with embarrassment. Thornstar narrowed his eyes.

"You are ShadowClan," he growled.

"I am not. Anymore," said Heartpaw.

"And how do you know we're going to except some random cat into our Clan? What makes you think we know you're telling the truth?" Thornstar demanded.

"Well..., I don't really know. I'm not ShadowClan though, that's for sure," Heartpaw said.

"Were you banished?" asked Thornstar. Another sleek, russet furred cat pushed through the crowd and joined Thornstar's side.

"Minkpaw and Eelpaw, go back to your den now," ordered the russet cat. Heartpaw thought hard and remembered it was Reedpelt, the deputy. He nodded in respect.

"What does he want?" growled Reedpelt.

"To join," replied Thornstar. Reedpelt cocked his head and evaluated Heartpaw. He turned to Thornstar. Heartpaw pricked his ears.

"We need more warriors," Reedpelt whispered.

"We are not desperate enough to take in a banished ShadowClan cat," replied Thornstar.

"We must not judge too quickly," replied Reedpelt, eyeing Heartpaw. Heartpaw gulped.

"But we must not make stupid decisions," replied Thornstar. They whispered even more quietly and Heartpaw couldn't catch their words. Finally, Thornstar and Reedpelt looked up.

"We will take you in. But we will watch you closely. If by a week, we are not sure about you, you will leave and never come back," announced Thornstar. Heartpaw smiled. He wasn't going to mess up. Everything happened for a reason. He was going to be RiverClan. He had a new start.

Ch. 3

"This is the elder's den," finished Deerpaw. They were in front of a bunch of fern bushes. Suddenly, a grey and white spotted cat poked his head out of the ferns.

"What is this?" he snapped. "Deerpaw, are you bringing in a ShadowClan cat without introducing him to me?" Deerpaw smiled.

"Heartpaw, this is Pigeonfeather," announced Deerpaw. Pigeonfeather grinned. He looked young to be an elder and not grumpy at all. He took a liking to the elder at once.

"Nice to meet you, Heartpaw," said Pigeonfeather.

"You too," he smiled.

"You must be thinking why I'm here," sighed Pigeonfeather. "My two hind legs are lame."

"Oh sorry," Heartpaw said, not knowing how to respond.

"I'm thirteen moons old," sighed Pigeonfeather.

"Deerpaw!" yelled a voice.

"Come on!" Deerpaw said and Heartpaw followed her to the middle of the camp where a brown and white cat was waiting impatiently. Beside him was a white cat with a black tail.

"That's my mentor," whispered Deerpaw into Heartpaw's ear. "He's pretty annoying."

"I have ears," said Deerpaw's mentor sternly. "I am Moorpelt. This is Blacktail. Good to meet you Heartpaw. I am Deerpaw's mentor and Blacktail will be yours for now." Heartpaw nodded. "We will not waste time. We will start training now. If you are to become RiverClan, then you must learn our ways." Heartpaw

nodded excitedly. Blacktail smiled in approval.

"Come," motioned Moorpelt. He led Deerpaw and Heartpaw out with Blacktail behind. They trotted into the forest. The air was cool but Heartpaw felt happier than he had had in a while. No cats had come over to talk to him but none had whispered to each other right in his face or started a fight. They seemed to be talking his arrival into their stride. But he knew he mustn't celebrate yet, he had to show that he was trustworthy and a good warrior. Blacktail turned to me.

"You will start with fighting," she told me. Moorpelt nodded.

"Deerpaw, you will attack Heartpaw," he orderd Deerpaw nodded eagerly. Heartpaw was starting to take a liking to her bright personality.

"Yes. For now, Heartpaw, you will only defend," said Blacktail. Heartpaw nodded and faced Deerpaw. He fixed his eyes on her and watched her every movement. She crouched and kept her tail low. Then she sprang, her paws out. Heartpaw's instinct was to try and push her down but he dodged sideway and turned to face her once more, restraining himself from striking out as she landed, back on him. Deerpaw turned around and pounced once more, lower to the ground. Heartpaw sidestepped but she shot her paw out to trip him. He managed to stumbled out of her grasp but she then lashed out with her front paw, going for a front paw strike. Heartpaw rolled away from her. She went for a back kick and Heartpaw managed to block her flying foot which didn't take much strength. Finally, Blacktail called a stop.

"Good job," she said. "How many moons old are you?"

"Um," Heartpaw thought. He hadn't thought about it. He had had more pressing things on his mind. But he thought to be about nine moons old. "Ten moons." Blacktail nodded.

"I'm eight moons old," grinned Deerpaw. Moorpelt rolled his eyes.

"Deerpaw, that was poor performance for someone who was attacking. You barely landed a blow!" Moorpelt said. Deerpaw hung her head and Heartpaw felt slightly guilty but mostly proud.

"Good job Heartpaw," Moorpelt then said. Heartpaw puffed out his chest fur in pride. Blacktail then told them to switch roles. This time, Deerpaw pricked her ears and was much more determined to win. Heartpaw too, felt a new spark of determination in him. He crouched and bunched up his muscles, feeling his strength. He concentrated hard on his position and the jump. Quickly, he leapt up, low and fast. Deerpaw didn't have time to react. She tried to roll away but Heartpaw rushed into her and brought her to the ground. They struggled and wrestled for a while, until Deerpaw almost slipped away but Heartpaw jumped onto her back, making her sprawl. He then overturned her and pinned her down. He cried to himself in triumph.

"Nice," commented Moorpelt.

"Very good," said Blacktail. "That was a very good leap, just make sure that you balance yourself properly, you were slightly to your right." Heartpaw nodded.

"Deerpaw, we're going to have to work on your defending *and* attacking," said Moorpelt seriously. Deerpaw sighed.

"But I'm two moons younger!" protested Deerpaw. Moorpelt frowned and gave her a stern look. Heartpaw was glad he wasn't his mentor, although Moorpelt would be able to teach him a lot.

"Do you think other cats care? Do you think a ShadowClan warrior of sixteen moons will care that you're only eight moons?" retorted Moorpelt harshly. Heartpaw felt slightly bad for Deerpaw.

"No...," she replied. Moorpelt sighed and his eyes softened, as if he had just realised how hard he was being on her.

"Come on, let's leave Heartpaw and Blacktail to it. They don't need us for now. We can work on defending first,"

Moorpelt said then spotted Deerpaw's worried look. "Don't worry, I'll teach you all there is to it." Blacktail beckoned Heartpaw to follow her. They made their way towards the sound of water.

"Let's see how good you are at hunting," she said.

"I don't know how to swim," admitted Heartpaw. Blacktail shrugged.

"You seem like a fast learner, you'll learn," said Blacktail. "Now hunt." Blacktail slipped away. Heartpaw watched till she was out of view and looked around. The ground was frozen and the singing of birds seemed slightly far away. He wouldn't be able to catch a bird, that was for sure. He crawled towards a bush. No sound. He peered in. There was no sign of life. He crept to the bark of a tree and suddenly saw a flicker of movement. He froze and waited. A lizard was still at the bottom of the tree. He had never eaten or caught a lizard but some of his Clanmates..., well former Clanmates had. Quickly, he slammed his front paw forward and felt the tiny lizard wriggle underneath him. He unsheathed his claws and caught the lizard. Quickly, he nipped it on the neck. It was tiny but it was food. He hoped RiverClan ate lizards. He continued on his way. He finally heard something. A small rustling. He looked up. Above him, on one of the bare branches was a squirrel. The trees, being so spread out in RiverClan, were not easy to jump from one to another. So the squirrel wouldn't only be able to flee by running down the tree. Heartpaw grinned. He crept to the bottom of the tree and started inching up, slowly. Suddenly, the squirrel spotted him and scurried down. Swiftly, Heartpaw leapt to the ground and followed the swift creature. He pelted towards it and raced after it as it made its escape. Finally, his claws caught its tail and it squeaked and tried to leap away but Heartpaw had caught it. He quickly bit into it and sighed in relief. He trotted to another tree foot where he had buried the lizard. Suddenly, Blacktail trotted towards him.

"Good job, Heartpaw. You did better than I thought you would," she said. "Come now. It is almost sunset." Heartpaw nodded enthusiastically. He followed Blacktail back into camp. A light ginger cat stepped forward.

"Good catch," he said, slightly shy. Heartpaw beamed.

"Thanks," he exclaimed.

"Heartpaw, this is one of our best swimmers. Sparkbelly," introduced Blacktail.

"Hey," said Sparkbelly. "We're all good swimmers."

"Don't flatter yourself," she smiled. She nodded to Heartpaw to drop the fresh-kill into the fresh-kill pile then nodded to allow him to choose something to eat.

"Go to the apprentices den and sleep for tonight," said Blacktail. "Tomorrow, we will do more training. And by a week, you will either have no Clan or you will be a proud RiverClan. Go now, Deerpaw and Eelpaw will tell you which nest is yours." Heartpaw nodded and trotted to the apprentice den, a small mouse clutched in his jaws. These cats were accepting him. They hadn't really talked to him as if he were one of their friends but they had accepted him. He would have a new start.

Ch. 4

Heartpaw woke up to the soft sound of trickling water. He opened his eyes. Sunlight streamed into the apprentice den. He looked around. Eelpaw was sound asleep but Deerpaw was nowhere to be seen. He poked his head out of the den. The sun had just started to rise and only one patrol was gathered at the entrance, talking in hushed voices. All the cats knew about Heartpaw by now and they had accepted the choice of their leader. That he would have a trial and then they would choose his outcome. He slipped out of the den and down towards the patrol of cats. He spotted Deerpaw amongst them. She beamed at him.

"Hey," she said. The other cats turned to him. Moorpelt was amongst them.

"Ah, Heartpaw," said Moorpelt. "Blacktail told me to tell you that you will start training in the afternoon, she has something to do for now." Sparkbelly was amongst the patrol and he nodded respectfully to the warrior.

"I am Beestripe," said one of the warriors, stepping forward.

"And I'm Rainfeather," said a light grey, striped she-cat.

"Good to meet you," beamed Heartpaw. Then the patrol slipped out of camp and Deerpaw whispered bye. Heartpaw turned back to the empty clearing then made his way to the small mewing of cats. He approached the nursery then hesitantly waited outside.

"Who is it?" came a voice. "You may come in." Heartpaw hesitated then walked in. The nursery was spacious and light streamed through from outside. The ground was sandy and soft. In green-leaf it would be warm but in leaf-bare, the nursery needed moss beds. A light tabby cat lay in one of the large moss beds. Three small kits scrambled near her side. Her eyes were tired and her movements slow.

"Oh, you must be Heartpaw," said the queen. Heartpaw nodded. Deerpaw had only pointed out the location of the nursery when she had showed him Clan, she had never brought him in or mentioned kits.

"I'm Stripedfur," said the queen.

"How old are they?" asked Heartpaw, looking at the kits. "And what are their names?"

"They're two moons old," beamed the queen proudly. "This one is Rosekit." She nudged a small, dark tabby kit. "Dustkit." She nodded to a small grey kit. "And little Hawkkit." Hawkkit was a light tabby cat who looked just like his mother.

"They're so cute," said Heartpaw. Stripedfur purred. "Can they walk?" Stripedfur nodded and to prove her point, Rosekit scrambled to her feet and trotted to Heartpaw. She ran to his tail and nipped into it. Heartpaw burst into amused purrs.

"They've been nagging me to go outside, but it's too cold and I'm too tired," sighed Stripedfur.

"I'll bring them out," Heartpaw suggested. Rosekit pulled at his tail and he laughed.

"Thank you," sighed Stripedfur in relief. "It would be a big favour."

"Sure thing," grinned Heartpaw. "Come on guys, let's go outside." Dustkit and Hawkkit leapt out of the nest.

"Yay, finally!" cried Rosekit. She rushed to the nursery's entrance.

"Be careful and listen to what Heartpaw tells you!" warned Stripedfur. Rosekit nodded quickly and she and her siblings quickly rushed outside. Heartpaw slipped out after them.

"Where are we going?" asked Rosekit. Heartpaw motioned for them to follow him. They brushed past some bushes and down a small hill. At the bottom trickled a, surprisingly,

unfrozen stream. Heartpaw led the kits to it.

"Why don't you play by the stream side?" suggested Heartpaw. Dustkit quickly threw himself on Rosekit who flung him off and bristled.

"I told you not to leap like that! It's such a bad technique," she mewed. Heartpaw laughed. Hawkkit watched his siblings then trotted to the stream side. He bent down and gazed at himself in the river.

"Hey!" he cried to his siblings. "It's me!" Rosekit looked down at her own reflection.

"Silly Hawkkit," she sighed. "It's just our reflections." Hawkkit frowned. Then Dustkit threw himself onto Rosekit once more. She swung him off.

"Don't do that!" she told him. Dustkit frowned and hissed. She leapt at him and they rolled down, wrestling angrily. Heartpaw joined Hawkkit by the stream side and looked down at his reflection. He didn't recognise himself.

"Why don't you join Rosekit and Dustkit?" asked Heartpaw.

"I don't want to fight," said Hawkkit.

"But warriors need to learn to fight," said Heartpaw. "Do you want me to show you some moves?"

"I want to become a medicine cat," informed Hawkkit. "But yeah, can you show me some moves?" Heartpaw nodded eagerly. He showed Hawkkit the crouch and Rosekit and Dustkit joined them. They all copied him. Then he showed them how to creep up on prey and how to tackle somebody else onto the ground, making sure to help them. Finally, he heard Blacktail calling him.

"We've got to go back. Blacktail is calling," said Heartpaw apologetically. The kits sighed sadly and solemnly followed him back to the den.

"So who's your father?" asked Heartpaw as they trotted to the nursery.

"Moorpelt," quipped Rosekit. Moorpelt, the grumpy mentor. He couldn't imagine him as a father.

"Come on, Stripedfur is waiting for you," informed Heartpaw, nudging the kits into the nursery. Stripedfur smiled and beckoned the kits over, giving each of them a warm lick.

"Thank you Heartpaw," she beamed. "They look so tired they'll probably sleep through the night, I hope they do."

"What do you say?" said Stripedfur to her kits.

"Thank you," chirped the kits. Heartpaw smiled and retreated out of the nursery. Blacktail padded towards him. She slipped into the nursery.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Great. I'll be much more rested now because of Heartpaw," came Stripedfur's reply.

"Great, he's settling in well then," said Blacktail. Heartpaw wondered if they thought he couldn't hear them.

"Yes, but in the end, the whole Clan will choose his outcome," mewed Stripedfur. Blacktail appeared next to Heartpaw and flicked her tail. He followed her out of camp.

"So you've met Rosekit, Dustkit and Hawkkit," said Blacktail.

"Yes, they're really cute," replied Heartpaw. Blacktail nodded and led him towards the river once more.

"We're headed for ThunderClan border," explained Blacktail. "I'll show you how to mark the border." Heartpaw almost wanted to tell her he knew how. "You would still have ShadowClan scent on you." Heartpaw nodded in understanding. Finally, Heartpaw smelt the strong smells of ThunderClan. He wrinkled his

nose. ThunderClan trees were more packed together, like ShadowClan but they were pine trees. A river separated ThunderClan from RiverClan. Blacktail marked the border. Suddenly, a patrol of cats appeared. They were big and menacing. ThunderClan didn't change, thought Heartpaw. A black and white tom hissed when he spotted Blacktail and Heartpaw. Another white and ginger cat lashed his tail. The two apprentices growled angrily, their eyes sparked with excitement. Heartpaw crouched and snarled back, lashing his tail. He still knew ThunderClan were strong and mean. He wanted to shred their fur. He needed to show his loyalty to his new Clan. RiverClan. He was RiverClan. He would be. He knew he would. RiverClan felt...right. Walking through the territory, nothing had felt out of place. He felt at home, like he had always lived there. He had never caught a squirrel like he had, so easily on the first day at RiverClan. Blacktail touched her tip of her tail to Heartpaw's shoulder.

"They cannot swim past," she told him. "We aren't here to provoke fights." Heartpaw nodded reluctantly.

"Get on your way," said Blacktail loudly.

"You do," hissed the ginger and white cat. "We only just got here. Since when does RiverClan tell us what to do?" Blacktail watched them calmly.

"Since always!" growled Heartpaw. He hadn't been in RiverClan for long but he felt the need to protect their name. He felt the strong blaze that he was RiverClan.

"Oh really, tiny apprentice?" snapped the black and white tom. He crinkled his nose. "You know, you smell a lot like ShadowClan. And WindClan." Heartpaw snarled. Blacktail stepped in front of him.

"He is a new apprentice, don't mind him," she said firmly. Heartpaw felt embarrassment flush through him and shame for not listening to Blacktail.

"Oh but we do mind him," growled the ginger and white cat.

"Leave, we have nothing to fight for," said Blacktail.

"Can we fight?" whispered one of the apprentices. "I bet I could take on that RiverClan apprentice." Heartpaw felt anger flare through him. Suddenly, a patrol of RiverClan cats burst through the bushes. Deerpaw was with them and she stood by Heartpaw's side. The RiverClan cats hissed at the ThunderClan cats and after a few glares, ThunderClan retreated.

"What happened?" asked Moorpelt.

"Nothing," said Blacktail. "I was just showing Heartpaw how to mark the border and they came along. Everything is fine." The patrol of cats nodded and parted on their way. Blacktail turned to Heartpaw, frowning.

"You should have listened to me," said Blacktail.

"I'm sorry, I just didn't like how they talked about our Clan," said Heartpaw.

"Our?" questioned Blacktail. "You are not RiverClan yet. I will be one of the main influencers to get you into RiverClan, if you do not listen to me, you will not be RiverClan." Heartpaw hung his head. "What if ThunderClan had attacked?"

"They wouldn't have crossed the river!" exclaimed Heartpaw.

"You never know, they are ThunderClan," said Blacktail. "Now come." Heartpaw followed Blacktail back into the middle of RiverClan. They practised fighting moves and did a few exercises on strength. By the time they were finished, Heartpaw was tired but felt as if he had accomplished more than ever. He slipped into the apprentice den feeling contented.

Ch. 5

For six days, Heartpaw showed Blacktail what he was and was not capable of and Blacktail tested him, taught him and tested his loyalty with a few unexpected questions and observing him. Finally, it was the last day. Deerpaw, Eelpaw and Heartpaw crouched in the apprentice den, talking excitedly.

"You're surely gonna be accepted," said Deerpaw. "You're like so good at everything!"

"But I don't think the elders would want him," said Eelpaw.

"Pigeonfeather would," said Deerpaw.

"But not Floodwhisker," Eelpaw said.

"Do you know everybody in the Clan?" asked Deerpaw. Heartpaw thought. He knew most of them. He knew it was important if he were to become RiverClan.

"Yeah..., just a few I haven't talked to," said Heartpaw.

"Who?" asked Deerpaw.

"Well I don't know," said Heartpaw. Just then Thornstar called the Clan together. Heartpaw shot a nervous look to Deerpaw and Eelpaw and they slipped out of the apprentice den and joined the other cats gathered in front of High Rock.

"RiverClan, we come today to decide the fate of a young apprentice, hoping to join RiverClan. We will all vote on it and of course, I will have the final decision," announced Thornstar. Heartpaw was feeling positive. None of the cats had eyed him or glared at him or whispered when he walked by. They had all been friendly. Even the kits were gathered with Stripedfur and Moorpelt near the High Rock. Moorpelt was giving Rosekit small little kind licks. Heartpaw had never seen him be so gentle.

"Now, we will waste no time. Blacktail, one of our best, strongest, smartest and most trustworthy warrior has been training and testing Heartpaw's skills and loyalty," Thornstar continued. "She will now come up and tell us about Heartpaw." Heartpaw's heart jumped. He suddenly felt excited but nervous. Blacktail walked up to the High Rock and took a deep breath.

"From what I've seen, Heartpaw is an enthusiastic apprentice. He has excellent fighting instincts and skills. Although we will have to teach him how to swim and fish when green-leaf comes, he knows all, if not more, than any of our apprentices at his age. He has shown a confident, strong and kind personality. He has taken RiverClan to his heart. He has proven that he really wants to be RiverClan and I fully believe we should let him enter RiverClan. I know, that he will make a great RiverClan warrior one day," said Blacktail grandly. Heartpaw felt his heart leap with joy. He had grown to like Blacktail for being a strict (sometimes fun though) and very good mentor.

"Now from what you have heard from Blacktail and what you have gotten to know about Heartpaw, you may make your choice. Those in favour of Heartpaw joining RiverClan, please move to the side of the warrior's den. Those who object move to the camp entrance's side," ordered Thornstar. There was some mumbling and cats started to part. Heartpaw watched, heart racing. He saw, to his dismay that Sparkbelly had moved towards the camp entrance. He had thought Sparkbelly was nice. He had never thought Sparkbelly had not liked him. Sparkbelly saw Heartpaw's eyes on him and bowed his head in apology. Heartpaw looked away and saw Wolfstep go towards the warrior's den. He spotted Moorpelt, Stripedfur and their kits move to the warrior's den. Deerpaw and Eelpaw both joined the warrior's den's side and gave Heartpaw smiles. He looked around. The Clan had spit in two. Pigeonfeather had gone to the warrior's den but Floodwhisker, as Eelpaw had predicted, had gone to the camp entrance. Beestripe seemed to hesitate in the middle and whispered into Acornheart's ear. They both nodded and joined Deerpaw and Eelpaw. Heartpaw sighed in relief. He saw a grey warrior, he had gone on patrol with him one day, his name was Greyspeck. Greyspeck grunted and made his way to the camp entrance. Heartpaw's heart sank. There seemed to be

the same number of cats on each side. Thornstar padded into the middle of the camp.

"To keep it neutral, Blacktail shall not vote as shall Reedpelt, Frogleap and I," Thornstar said. He started to count the number of cats and Heartpaw's heart sank. There were two cats gathered at the camp entrance then at the warrior's den. Just like that, his whole new little bright future was destroyed. He saw nothing he could do after leaving RiverClan. WindClan was not an option he wanted. ThunderClan was never going to be an option and ShadowClan had already made it clear they didn't want him anymore. He would be Clanless forever.

"The vote is that Heartpaw shall not join RiverClan," said Thornstar after a pause. Blacktail sighed and shook her had to Heartpaw in apology. He looked down. He fought back the overpowering feelings inside him. He had thought he had found a home. All the cats had seemed to accept him.

"Wait," said a voice. Heartpaw looked up. Sparkbelly had spoken. "It is not that I do not think Heartpaw is worthy of joining RiverClan but if he is to join. He must not be keeping secrets. He will have to come into RiverClan and we must know what has happened to him for him to get kicked out of ShadowClan. I think the only reason most of us are voting against him is because of the secrecy of his past." A few cats nodded. Heartpaw felt hope returning. Thornstar nodded.

"Heartpaw, you will prove your loyalty to RiverClan by telling us why you were disowned by ShadowClan," Thornstar told Heartpaw. Heartpaw felt suddenly nervous once more. If they knew the truth, they wouldn't be able to trust him. But they had voted against him anyways.

"Heartpaw? Will you tell us?" asked Thornstar. "We must know you will not keep secrets from us."

"Yes," Heartpaw croaked then cleared his voice and looked up. He had nothing to lose. "I met a WindClan cat at a Gathering. We fell in love. I was stupid. I never thought of the consequences. I thought that I could be loyal to my Clan and my

mate. But of course, I was not thinking long term. It would never work out. Finally, my Clan found out and I was isolated." Heartpaw cleared his throat and hesitated. He didn't want to tell his Clan he had killed one of his own Clanmates.

"Go on," urged Sparkbelly.

"I was in isolation. But the night was cold and the next day, I looked for better shelter. Some rogues said I could stay with them but in order to stay I had to pay my share. I tried but they demanded too much. Finally, I ran away, I should not have. I ran to my Clan and without telling them anything that had happened in my isolation, they took me in with wide arms. Everything was back to normal. Then one day, the rogues came back for me. One of the warriors..., Spottedwhisker, died because of them. They said it was my fault. And I was kicked out... I went to WindClan. And I thought about joining them but they didn't treat me like you have. I didn't feel *at home*. Like I do now. And so I left, well they made me leave when I got better. And I came here," finished Heartpaw. The camp was silent. Then Sparkbelly took a step forward, dipped his head to Heartpaw and moved to the warrior's den side. Heartpaw didn't understand but hope sparked in his mind. Then Greyspeck followed Sparkbelly's lead. Then so did Smallear, one of the warrior's Heartpaw had shared a mouse with. Then three more cats Heartpaw didn't know moved to the otherside. And finally, only Floodwhisker stood, alone voting against him.

"Then the vote is made," declared Thornstar, pride glowing in his eyes as he gazed at Heartpaw. "Heartpaw we welcome you as a full member of RiverClan." Heartpaw grinned. His heart leaped. He suddenly felt lighter. Then his new Clanmates started calling his name.

"Heartpaw! Heartpaw! Heartpaw!" Their cried grew louder and they surrounded Heartpaw. Heartpaw smiled and couldn't help but feel the burst of happiness and cry out in joy. Sparkbelly walked up to Heartpaw.

"Welcome to RiverClan, Heartpaw," he said with a dip of his head.

"Thank you," said Heartpaw. Deerpaw and Eelpaw joined Heartpaw's side.

"Wow! You brought rogues to your Clan," said Eelpaw. Heartpaw frowned. "Just kidding! You're RiverClan now!"

"I knew everybody would want you!" cried Deerpaw. Heartpaw thanked his friends happily. Finally, the cats dispersed and Thornstar, Reedpelt and Frogleap approached Heartpaw. Blacktail joined them.

"Welcome to RiverClan," said Reedpelt. "I know that Blacktail will teach you our ways and train you to become the best warrior you can be." Heartpaw nodded happily.

"Welcome, Heartpaw, to RiverClan," nodded Frogleap. "I know Blacktail will teach you to follow the warrior code and to have mercy. I know she will train you to be a great warrior." Frogleapt nodded and padded off with Reedpelt. Thornstar stepped forward.

"Heartpaw, I am glad to have you in RiverClan. I did not agree in taking you in at first but you have proven that you are a good apprentice," said Thornstar. "We know about your mistakes in the past but we will, as your Clan, help you move past them. You have a new beginning." Heartpaw beamed till his cheeks hurt and Blacktail stepped forward. She just looked at him, smiling mildly.

"You're going to become the best warrior in RiverClan," she told him. "My apprentice." Heartpaw grinned and felt as if he might explode with joy. Deerpaw and Eelpaw dragged him to the fresh-kill pile.

"Aren't you hungry? After all of that?" Eelpaw said.

"Yes," nodded Heartpaw. "Very."

"Let's share that squirrel," suggested Deerpaw. The three apprentices took the squirrel to the side and relished it. They talked about all the fun times they would have in RiverClan together. For the first time in a long time, Heartpaw felt contented and at home.

For the first time in a long time, Heartpaw had a Clan and a new beginning.

Ch. 6

Heartpaw curled up in his nest. He listened to the owls hooting outside. He closed his eyes and felt the calm of his new home. RiverClan. He knew he was where he was supposed to be. It felt right. He had only ever felt this much at home the first few moons of his life, when he had Stormpelt and Firkit.

Heartpaw opened his eyes and looked around. He slowly got up. A stream was trickling next to where he was. He looked down into the stream and gazed into his reflection. He saw himself, his fur nicely groomed and his amber eyes. Then he saw another face. A grey cat with calm eyes. Heartpaw's heart leaped.

"S-S-Stormpelt?" stammered Heartpaw, looking back. There, stood his father. His fur was groomed and somehow he looked more content then Heartpaw had ever seen.

"Yes, Heartpaw, it's me," said Stormpelt with a smile.

"Y-you're in StarClan," was all Heartpaw could manage. He didn't know what to feel. He was feeling surprised, overjoyed, excited, but he also had questions. He had never thought he would see his father in StarClan. Only Brightheart ever came.

"Yes, Heartpaw, I'm not in the Dark Forest," chuckled Stormpelt.

"Um.., how are you?" asked Heartpaw.

"I'm in StarClan. I'm great," said Stormpelt.

"And you have Brightheart," Heartpaw replied. "Why didn't you ever come and see me?"

"You weren't ready," sighed Stormpelt. Heartpaw opened his mouth to protest. "No.., I wasn't ready."

"Why not?" asked Heartpaw.

"Just some things..., about you," Stormpelt explained with a huff. Suddenly, his eyes didn't seem as friendly anymore. "Heartpaw, I have to tell you something. It's hard.. um..."

"What is it?" asked Heartpaw.

"Well," said Stormpelt taking a deep breath. Heartpaw frowned.

"Dad, are you alright?" asked Heartpaw. Stormpelt looked away. His fur slowly rising. Then he turned back to Heartpaw, his gaze cold and judging.

"Don't call me that," he said softly, almost in a growl.

"What, why?" cried Heartpaw, confused.

"I don't have a son, I don't have a Half Clan son," growled Stormpelt.

"What do you mean?" asked Heartpaw.

"I thought seeing you here tonight might change my mind, but no, it has not," Stormpelt said coldly. "You chose to become RiverClan. To betray my Clan. You are not my son anymore." Heartpaw's eyes bulged. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. His own father, the one he looked up to, loved the most in his life, was disowning him.

"But..., Dad, really? Dad..., how about Brightheart...?" Heartpaw stammered confusedly. His whole body seemed like it was plunging into cold water.

"I have another son and daughter. Real ShadowClan warriors. I don't need you," hissed Stormpelt. "Brightheart told me you would change Clan. I didn't believe her. I was sure you'd never betray your Clan. Betray me."

"But I didn't...," protested Heartpaw.

"You killed Spottedwhisker. You brought rogues to our Clan. You stained our reputation by seeing a WindClan apprentice,"

growled Stormpelt coldly. He lashed his tail and his eyes flashed with disdain. "You are not my son." Suddenly, darkness swirled around Heartpaw and his vision turned dark. Then he only felt cold.

"Heartpaw," snapped a firm voice. Heartpaw sprung to his paws and his eyes shot open. He blinked as he looked around. He was in the apprentice den, it was the crack of dawn. Frogleap stood over him, a frown on his face. Deerpaw and Eelpaw watched from behind, looking nervous and fidgety.

"Wha?" Heartpaw babbled.

"Finally," huffed Frogleap. "You were having a nightmare. Turned as cold as stone. No herbs could've helped that. Thank StarClan they saved you." Heartpaw wasn't so sure about that.

"What happened?" asked Eelpaw, peering anxiously at Heartpaw. "You were like trembling and your eyes rolled in your head." Deerpaw shuddered.

"I um.. I just had a bad dream," Heartpaw assured them. Frogleapt frowned, as if he was reading Heartpaw's lies and questioning them.

"Yes well, your dream was a pretty bad one," Frogleap said. "What was it about?"

"StarClan...," Heartpaw trailed off, looking down. His head whirled with what Stormpelt had told him. The warm, protective father was gone, replaced by some other cold cat he didn't recognise.

"A prophecy?" inquired Frogleap. The two apprentice inched closer to Heartpaw.

"No..., it was my father..," said Heartpaw.

"From ShadowClan?" asked Frogleap.

"He's um, from StarClan," said Heartpaw.

"Yes but he is ShadowClan," Frogleap clarified. Heartpaw nodded. "What did he say?"

"Don't worry, I'm not about to change Clan or something," Heartpaw said.

"What did he say?" repeated Frogleap, looking slightly worried.

"He disowned me," whispered Heartpaw.

"Really, why is that?" Frogleap questioned calmly.

"Because I apparently betrayed him..," Heartpaw said frowning.

"You're with us now. Don't pay attention to your dead father," assured Frogleap. "Now go on out, your mentors must be looking for you." Heartpaw nodded and solemnly padded out with the two apprentices at his side. He couldn't wrap his mind around what his father had said. He couldn't understand what Stormpelt had said about having another daughter and son. He was Brightheart's only kit. He was the only kit. The only kit Stormpelt swore to take care of, never let out of sight, always be proud of. But he wasn't Stormpelt's son anymore. Blacktail trotted over to him.

"Why the sad face? You're RiverClan," she mewed.

"Nothing," mumbled Heartpaw.

"There's a Gathering tonight. Thornstar will be mentioning you," Blacktail told Heartpaw. "So you're going." The news hardly helped Heartpaw's mood. He went through battle training and hunting for the elders as if in a trance and finally, they departed to go to the Gathering. Deerpaw was shivering with excitement by his side. Thornstar led the way as they slipped through the bracken and alongside the river. The Clan was quiet but he could feel their strength as they walked together towards the Four Trees. He couldn't have felt prouder. Going to the Gathering were, Thornstar, Reedpelt, Frogleap, Beestripe, Sparkbelly, Moorpelt, Blacktail, Smoketail (A messy grey furred warrior with

brownish ears), Deerpaw, Embergaze (a light golden tabby with green eyes who was extremely shy and seemed to shy away from Heartpaw) and of course, Heartpaw. They finally saw the Four Trees in the distance and Heartpaw's heart raced. It would be his first Gathering since he was banished from ShadowClan and became RiverClan. He was almost trembling with anticipation and excitement. Deerpaw pressed her pelt against his, speaking quickly about how excited she was. They finally reached the Four Trees where cats were gathered. Heartpaw suddenly felt extremely nervous he felt about to pass out. He then spotted Cinderstar. She was talking to the WindClan leader, Fawnstar. Heartpaw felt unease creep through him. He wondered what they were talking about. RiverClan marched past WindClan warriors, some of them huddled together and past ShadowClan warriors. They were packed together, talking in low voices. Heartpaw's heart started racing as he spotted his former Clanmates. He saw Oakfall, Shadefern, Rabbitleap Nightcloud, Sorreclaw, Flamebreeze, Thistlenose and... Honeylight. Honeylight was whispering into Oakfall's ear and Heartpaw quickly looked away, hoping his former Clanmates hadn't seen him. He settled in the middle of the crowd of RiverClan cats, although many left to talk to other cats. Heartpaw pressed himself nearer to Deerpaw and held his head down.

"Do you recognise the ShadowClan cats?" asked Deerpaw in a low voice. Heartpaw nodded quickly. "Who are they?"

"The light ginger one..., is Honeylight," said Heartpaw, lifting his eyes for a moment to rest them on Honeylight's soft, light fur. She was more beautiful then ever. He shook his head. What was he thinking? "She's talking to Oakfur, the older warrior." Deerpaw nodded as she stared at Honeylight and Oakfur.

"The black she-cat next to that dark tabby cat is Nightcloud and the tabby is Shadefern," continued Heartpaw. "That one over there is Sorrelclaw and Flamebreeze. And the one at the end if Thistlenose." Deerpaw nodded then looked down at Heartpaw.

"Are you nervous?" she asked.

"Yeah!" exclaimed Heartpaw under his breath. Sparkbelly

joined their side.

"Don't be nervous, you're with you now. No RiverClan warrior is shy or nervous," whispered Sparkbelly. Heartpaw almost wanted to say Embergaze. "Come on Heartpaw, you're one of us. Hold your head high. Be proud." Heartpaw suddenly felt a spark of confidence and pride in being RiverClan. Sparkbelly was right. He looked up and puffed out his chest, looking as confident as he could. Suddenly, he heard a gasp come from one of the ShadowClan cats. Then he felt the piercing stares of cats on him. But he kept his head high. Honeylight turned to Heartpaw, her eyes wide. He stared at her, not flinching from her gaze. He didn't know what she was feeling but after a while, she turned away. Then the leaders, to Heartpaw's relief, leapt up and a hush spread. Falconstar began.

"Leaf-bare has come and is soon going, without any loss for ThunderClan," he said. A few ThunderClan cats cheered. Falconstar stepped back into the shadows and Fawnstar went next.

"Leaf-bare has brought some troubles with food but we are now doing very well and we now have a new warrior, Firecry," announced Fawnstar. Everybody started chanting Firecry's name and Heartpaw spotted the young warrior, puffing his chest out in pride as Ivypaw wrapped her tail around his happily. Heartpaw grimaced and looked away. Then Thornstar stepped up.

"RiverClan, is thriving. We have plenty of prey and our warriors have been having good training sessions and hunting patrols have been coming home with plenty. We have a new apprentice, who has just joined RiverClan. We have let him in knowing he is strong and will prove himself a great warrior," declared Thornstar, then he looked directly at Heartpaw. "Heartpaw." Howls and growls rose from ShadowClan. Cinderstar stepped in beside Thornstar and shot a look at Heartpaw. Heartpaw was aware of Thistlenose, Oakfur and Shadefern hissing insults. He could also see Rabbitleap, sheathing and unsheathing his claws, digging them into the. Honeylight was looking away, with an expression Heartpaw didn't know.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you that you have taken in a rejected apprentice and a traitor," spat Cinderstar. Heartpaw

suddenly felt so much hatred toward her. She had been the one to tell him never underestimate the enemy, she had been so wise, and now she was full of hatred. "Maybe he lied to you to make you take him in, but let us, ShadowClan, his former Clan, tell you, that he is no good. He should be abandoned to the rogues." Heartpaw felt slightly hurt by her harsh words but tried not to let it show. Deerpaw pressed closer to Heartpaw. Heartpaw turned and met Ivypaw's eyes. Ivypaw gazed at Deerpaw and at Heartpaw, her expression unreadable. Heartpaw looked down at his paws. It seemed the only cats he didn't know were ThunderClan and they didn't seem to care about the RiverClan and ShadowClan rivalry. They seemed lightly amused.

"Oh no, Heartpaw told us the truth. How he betrayed you. But he is RiverClan, he will not betray RiverClan," answered Thornstar evenly and met Heartpaw's gaze, giving him a slight nod of encouragement. Rabbitleap leapt up and hissed, lashing his tail.

"Heartpaw, you are a disgrace. Mousebrained, foxdung, buzzard faced, snake tongued, mange-pelt dung faced cat!" growled Rabbitleap. Oakfur joined his side, growling angrily. Nightcloud watched, her eyes cold with hostility. Honeylight watched from behind, gazing at Heartpaw with something he didn't understand nor cared.

"Aww," grinned Moorpelt. "ShadowClan is jealous of RiverClan." Oakfur bristled.

"We are not!" growled Flamebreeze.

"We would never be jealous of RiverClan. ShadowClan, stay back," hissed Cinderstar. Thornstar lashed his tail.

"But it seems you are," said Thornstar. "Yelling unreasonable insults."

"ShadowClan was always jealous," hissed Sparkbelly. Even Embergaze bristled.

"Inside, you're all cowering cowards," spat Embergaze, his voice soft but powerful. Thornstar stood, watching his Clan, his

eyes telling them not to get into a fight. ShadowClan though were bristling and Cinderstar couldn't seem to keep them under control. The moon was shining brightly over them, urging the Gathering to continue. Nightcloud placed her cool eyes on Heartpaw then leapt out and lashed out. Heartpaw barely dodged her blow. Thornstar stepped forward, glaring at Cinderstar.

"Keep your warriors under control," he boomed. Falconstar joined Thornstar's side.

"Yes, Cinderstar, you don't seem to be very much in control of your Clan. Maybe you aren't made to be leader..," said Falconstar lightly, a small hint of amusement in his voice as he watched the ShadowClan leader, trying to keep her Clan under control. ShadowClan looked up at Falconstar and a few cats backed off, wanting to show him wrong. Cinderstar seemed to be trying not to look away with embarrasement.

"ShadowClan!" snapped Cinderstar. "Stay back. It is a full moon. Remember the truce." Rabbitleap lashed his tail with Nightcloud by his side, ignoring their leader.

"Cinderstar, keep your warriors under control," Thornstar growled. Cinderstar glared at him.

"Rabbitleap. Nightcloud, go back!" Cinderstar yelled loudly, her eyes sparked with anger. Nightcloud and Rabbitleap looked up at their leader and after a pause, reluctantly padded back to the rest of ShadowClan.

"Now, if I'm not mistaken, this Gathering is not over yet, because of Cinderstar's unprofessional interruption. ShadowClan has not announced any news yet," Fawnstar said with narrowed eyes. Cinderstar took a deep breath, Heartpaw could practically feel her embarrassment.

"ShadowClan is thriving," she said, her voice almost a growl. Goldenheart has had two kits, Blizzardkit and Birdkit." A few ShadowClan cats managed a weak yowl. Thornstar snickered and leap down. He flicked his tail for RiverClan to follow and together, they made their way away from the Four Trees. Frogleap, after

having met with the other medicine cats which also meant Lionbreeze, the ShadowClan medicine cat, joined them. They made their way back to RiverClan, chatting and joking about ShadowClan. Heartpaw felt joy bursting in his heart, thinking of how his Clanmates had defended him as if he really were RiverClan. And he was.

Ch. 7

Heartpaw slipped into the apprentice den and spotted Eelpaw curled up in his nest. He lifted his head up groggily.

"How was it?" he mumbled. Deerpaw trotted into the den after Heartpaw.

"Oh my StarClan! You should have been there!" cried Deerpaw. "The only time something cool happens at a Gathering and you miss it!" Eelpaw's eyes grew.

"What happened?" he gaped. Deerpaw bounced into her nest and Heartpaw slipped into his, content on listening the two apprentices chat.

"Well, Thornstar announced about Heartpaw joining us and ShadowClan was so triggered you couldn't imagine. One cat even clawed at Heartpaw! She was a maniac! And then another cat attacked Heartpaw!" exclaimed Deerpaw. Eelpaw leaned forward to listen better to Deerpaw. "And they started hissing and one of them even called Heartpaw a Foxheart!"

"No way!" cried Eelpaw.

"Yes way!" said Deerpaw. "And then Falconstar came forward and was all dark and almighty and he was like "Cinderstar you haven't got control over ShadowClan." and she was all like "Yeah I do" and then she had to yell at them to get back. I was sorta hoping there would be a fight... Anyways then Fawnstar was like "You idiot leader you shouldn't even be leader. Go get a life"." Eelpaw's eyes were bulging.

"She did not say that!" he gasped.

"Yes she did!" exclaimed Deerpaw excitedly. Heartpaw giggled.

"No she didn't," he said. Eelpaw grunted.

"Oh," he said in disappointment. Deerpaw gave Heartpaw a pointed look. Heartpaw shrugged.

"And then Cinderstar said something about kits in her Clan and then Thornstar said let's go and we all left together and it was so cool. You should've seen the look on the faces of ShadowClan," grinned Deerpaw.

"I should've been there!" protested Eelpaw. "It's not fair." Deerpaw nodded in agreement.

"Time to sleep," Heartpaw muttered. The two apprentices hushed their voices and whispered to each other softly to let Heartpaw get some rest.

Heartpaw trotted out of the apprentice den and met Blacktail at the entrance. She smiled at him.

"You have the morning off to hunt for the elders," she informed him. "Hunt well. And be back by noon. Today is the first day of new-leaf!" Heartpaw grinned. He was excited to be out of the cold once more. He slipped out of camp and smelt the air. It was fresh and cool. Although it did not seem like new-leaf. The ground was crisp with frost and the trees were still bare but he could feel new-leaf right around the corner. He trotted towards the river, feeling elated. After a while, he reached the edge of ShadowClan border and spotted the Thunderpath through some trees. He knew there were no Clans beyond the Thunderpath and only the unknown. He focused on hunting instead. He looked around and listened, keeping still and silent, making sure he was downwind. He sniffed and heard a rustling of leaves and smelt the warm scent of mouse. He immediately crouched and crept forward. Suddenly, a blur of ginger burst in front of him and he jumped back in surprise. He heard the mouse scuttled away and huffed in anger. He puffed out his fur and turned to the intruder. He laid his eyes on a ginger cat with green, grumpy eyes.

"What are yo-" Heartpaw's eyes bulged. "*Gingerfern?* What are you doing here?" Gingerfern grunted.

"Nice to see you too," huffed Gingerfern. The rogue seemed older than ever. Her fur was scruffy and messy, as if it had never been groomed properly for some time. She had been one of the rogues and former ShadowClan that Heartpaw had met when looking for shelter in his isolation.

"You're on RiverClan territory!" growled Heartpaw, suddenly remembering about trespass. "Get out! Or I'll make you." Gingerfern raised an eyebrow.

"I traveled a lot, too much, to find you, so you're going to listen," grunted Gingerfern. "Hmph.., but at this point I don't even want to tell you. You don't seem very grateful or happy to see me."

"Well, you're one of the rogues who attacked ShadowClan and got me banished," Heartpaw pointed out.

"I thought you're RiverClan now. A happy and proud RiverClan," Gingerfern teased.

"I am!" bristled Heartpaw.

"Right great then, you should be thanking me," Gingerfern said. "So, do you want to hear what I've got to say or not?" Heartpaw wanted to claw her pelt off and chase her off but curiosity won... and killed the cat.

"Right what do you want to tell me?" asked Heartpaw impatiently. "You gotta go soon." Gingerfern narrowed her eyes and settled onto the ground slowly to Heartpaw's dismay.

"It's about Stormpelt," Gingerfern explained. Heartpaw's tail twitched. "Did he tell you anything?"

"What, from StarClan?" Heartpaw said.

"Well, where else? The Dark Forest?"

"Should've been," said Heartpaw and Gingerfern at the same time. They both glared at each other.

"What is it?" asked Heartpaw finally.

"Stormpelt, is not who you think he is," Gingerfern said. Heartpaw narrowed his eyes and almost burst out in laughter.

"Yeah, I figured that out," huffed Heartpaw.

"So he did talk to you...," Gingerfern said.

"What do you want to tell me already?" said Heartpaw impatiently.

"Shut up," Gingerfern glared resentfully. "I'm going to take my time." Heartpaw grumbled. "Anyways.., before I was so rudely interrupted, Stormpelt is not who you think he is. I mean, you should have figured out by now he had some serious issued with love. I mean, first he liked Sandwing, then he liked Brightheart, then he liked me and Brightheart, then he liked me, then he liked Brightheart and then, who knows? Oh and before Sandwing, he used to have a crush on one of the apprentice medicine cats in ShadowClan. Her name was Lightpaw. She died though." Heartpaw cringed.

"You tracked me all the way to RiverClan to tell me this?" Heartpaw said.

"Shut your trap and let me finish," snapped Gingerfern. "I'm trying to be nice."

"You're not doing a very good job," muttered Heartpaw. Gingerfern growled.

"Ugh sorry," mumbled Heartpaw. "Please continue."

"Well anyway, although he does love Brightheart, I think he was too long away from her," said Gingerfern. Heartpaw frowned.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I started thinking about him. After that day you came to us when you were in isolation. I had a long think about it. Literally every single day and hour until the attack on ShadowClan. And even after that, I thought some more. And knowing Stormpelt, he

would have moved on after Brightheart's death, just like mine. And then after a while, he must have realised, he still loved Brightheart and so just threw away the other she-cat for Brightheart and of course, after he died and went to StarClan and is now reunited with Brightheart and bla bla bla," Gingerfern took a deep breath.

"What are you trying to tell me?" asked Heartpaw.

"Stormpelt might have other kits," said Gingerfern. "But with another she-cat." For some reason it didn't surprise Heartpaw. Stormpelt had told him something about it in his dream. He didn't feel sadness, only slight anger and disappointment.

"You are not surprised," Gingerfern frowned. "So you must have known and the point of my trip was wasted." Heartpaw suddenly felt slightly grateful to Gingerfern although he was sure she wasn't doing it out of love.

"Your trip was not wasted. I do not know more than Stormpelt having other kits. The only thing is, the only other queen which has had kits in ShadowClan was Roselight. And she was definitely with Foxwhisker," Heartpaw said.

"Are you sure no other news has come up? About new kits? From any Clan?" Gingerfern questioned. Heartpaw shook his head. He was sure. He remembered Roselight's two remaining kits, Dawnkit and Flamekit."

"Nothing at all?" Gingerfern pressed. Heartpaw shook his head once more. Of course not! He would have known. Why would Gingerfern think he was lying. Then suddenly, he remembered something. He froze.

"Heartpaw? Do you remember something? What's with that face?" asked Gingerfern.

"You're really annoying," Heartpaw finally said, after a pause. "But I think I remember something."

"What?" asked Gingerfern pointedly. Heartpaw hesitated. He didn't want it to be true.

"Cinderstar mentioned something about Goldenheart having kits...," murmured Heartpaw. "But that can't be right. Stormpelt died way a long time ago!"

"Are you sure?" said Gingerfern. "She could've been pregnant before his death and carried those kits without you knowing, what with you being distracted by that WindClan cat, isolation and banishment."

"Maybe...," sighed Heartpaw. "But it has nothing to do with me."

"It does. It means you have half siblings," said Gingerfern.

"I don't care. They won't know," Heartpaw shrugged. He didn't see the problem.

"If they don't, it'll be fine," Gingerfern said. "But if they do find out..." Heartpaw raised an eyebrow. Suddenly, he heard the talking of cats. He jumped to his paws and growled at Gingerfern.

"Get out now!" he warned. Gingerfern nodded and stiffly got up. She then unsheathed her claws and raked them on Heartpaw's snout. His eyes widened as blood poured out.

"Wh-what?" he stammered angrily.

"So they won't be suspicious," explained Gingerfern without emotion. "You'll live." Then she ruffled Heartpaw's fur and bounded away, swiftly for an old cat. Suddenly, four cats appeared. Acornheart, Smoketail, Smallear and Cloudbreeze. Cloudbreeze was a white fluffy cat with mean dark eyes.

"Heartpaw what happened?" asked Smoketail. The other cats sniffed around.

"I smell rogue!" cried Smallear.

"It's nothing. There was a rogue who trespassed, I chased her off though," Heartpaw's heart raced as he lied. He was glad Gingerfern had scratched him or he wouldn't have been able to

carry out the lie. He felt guilty for lying to his new Clan. Cats who trusted him. Acornheart nodded.

"We should go back," she said. Heartpaw nodded. "You're bleeding. Cloudbreeze and Smoketail, look around to see if the rogue is still hanging around." She beckoned Heartpaw to follow her.

"Huh, seems like you guys had some scuffle," said Smoketail, trotting beside them. Heartpaw nodded, not wanting to utter another lie.

"Don't worry, Frogleap will easily sort it out," assured Acornheart.

"Yeah, good job Heartpaw," congratulated Smoketail. Heartpaw couldn't help a small smile.

Ch. 8

Frogleap inspected Heartpaw's scratch and applied some some of poultice. Heartpaw crinkled his nose.

"There, you're fine," assured Frogleap. Heartpaw nodded.

"Thanks," he said, trotting out into the camp. Blacktail walked up to him.

"I heard about what happened. You alright?" she asked. Heartpaw nodded. "Great, then we can still do what I was planning. Come on. Let's not waste any more time." Heartpaw followed Blacktail out of camp.

"The river sides have unfrozen and the water isn't rushing very quickly," explained Blacktail. "So you're going to have your first swimming lessons."

"What?" gasped Heartpaw. "But it's so cold!"

"You're gonna have to learn how to swim eventually," pointed out Blacktail.

"But in green-leaf or even new-leaf," protested Heartpaw.

"Today is the first day of new-leaf," pointed out Blacktail.

"But it still feels like leaf-bare," moaned Heartpaw.

"You're starting to sound like Deerpaw and Eelpaw," said Blacktail. "Now stop whining."

"But," whined Heartpaw. Blacktail gave him a warning look. He sighed and rolled his eyes. "Fine." They perched at the side of the river. The water rushed slowly past. Heartpaw's heart turned cold.

"Scared?" asked Blacktail. Heartpaw shook his head. "Don't worry, it's not as hard as you think."

"Wh-what do I do?" asked Heartpaw.

"You will slowly go in. Don't worry, I'll be right here the whole time. And you will slowly sink into the water. Whatever you do, do not panic. If you have any doubts, don't move and just keep your head above the water. On the contrary of what you might think, if you stay still, you will not sink. You are not a rock," Blacktail explained. "You will paddle slowly and follow the current. Don't go against it. That's all to it for now. Don't worry, it's not as hard as you think." Heartpaw doubted it. He slowly touched the water with his paw. It was ice cold. Blacktail nudged him forward. Heartpaw took a deep breath and slowly lowered his right paw into the water. The water was freezing. He grit his teeth and slowly lowered his whole body into the water. He felt the cold water pulling him away and his eyes widened with panic. Suddenly he was in the water. It was cold, rushing around him from all sides. It pulled him down the river. The roaring of waves crashed in his ears. He suddenly felt water go into his ears and he opened his mouth in a silent scream. Cold water rushed into his mouth and he gagged. He flailed his legs in the cold water, thrashing about. He couldn't see anything properly.

"Heartpaw!" yelled Blacktail. "Get a hold of yourself and stop thrashing. Stop thrashing!" Her words slowly sunk into Heartpaw and he stopped thrashing, letting the water lead him. Suddenly, he found his head above water. He coughed and spat out the water. He looked to the bank where Blacktail walked alongside him. He slowly paddled then went faster and faster.

"See?" Blacktail said. "Not so hard." Heartpaw couldn't speak, he was too concentrated. He kept paddling forward, concentrating on keeping his head above the water. He grinned.

"I'm doing it!" he cried. Blacktail smiled and flicked her tail.

"I told you it wasn't hard," she told him. Finally, Blacktail told Heartpaw to get out. Heartpaw didn't want to but his

whole body was cold and numb so he quickly climbed out. He shook himself dry and flicked his ear.

"Oof, that was cold," he muttered.

"We should go back now. You need warmth and rest, a cold swim is good but you need to get warm after or you'll get sick," Blacktail said. "Come on, hurry up." Heartpaw trotted faster after Blacktail. They entered camp and Heartpaw slipped into the apprentice den. He suddenly felt his muscles tired and heavy. His eyes drooped. Swimming had taken a toll on him. He sank into his nest happily and closed his eyes.

Ch. 9

Heartpaw wrinkled his nose. The herbs smelt foul. Deerpaw grimaced.

"Ew, I'm not eating that," she said.

"Yes you are," said Frogleap matter of factly. Eelpaw took a small bite. He grinned and gobbled it down.

"Tasted bad but I like it," he said then burped. Deerpaw stepped away from him.

"You're disgusting," she said. He stuck his tongue out at her and trotted out of the medicine cat den. Heartpaw took a deep breath and quickly chewed the herbs and swallowed. They were going to the Moonstone. He couldn't wait. Finally, Deerpaw followed Heartpaw's lead and they both slipped out of the medicine den towards the camp entrance were Moorpelt, Blacktail, Eelpaw and Beestripe. Beestripe was talking to Eelpaw.

"Any bad behaviour and you're not going to any Gathering till you become warrior," Beestripe was saying. Deerpaw's eyes went wide. Blacktail smiled at Heartpaw.

"All ready?" she asked. Deerpaw and Heartpaw nodded.

"Then we're off," said Moorpelt and the three apprentices followed their mentors out. They trotted towards the Moonstone. The morning was warm and a gentle breeze blew. Soon, they were out of RiverClan and Heartpaw was finding it hard to take in all the new smells and sights. They walked up a small hill of wild grass and bramble bushes. They found themselves on flat ground. The grass was short and the breeze blew more freely. In front of them towered a large thing. Heartpaw had never seen anything like it. He gaped.

"What is that?" he asked.

"That is a Twoleg den," explained Blacktail. Eelpaw and Deerpaw looked equally amazed. They made their way past the Twoleg den and smelt the strong scent of a monster. No cat or dog scent could be smelt. Soon, they entered the forest once more. Newleaf had brought small leaves to the trees. Flowers were starting to open and the nights were slowly getting longer. Heartpaw trotted after Blacktail, making sure to keep pace, he didn't want to be left behind. Soon, they climbed up another hill. The going was steep and tiring. Heartpaw's muscles were burning by the time they made it to the top. The evening had almost arrived. Finally, the mentors decided to call a break.

"We can stop here," decided Beestripe. Moorpelt nodded.

"I will take Deerpaw hunting," said Moorpelt. Beestripe and Blacktail nodded.

"I'm going to bring Eelpaw around, teach him a few things about the place," said Beestripe.

"Heartpaw, we're going hunting," said Blacktail, flicking her tail. Heartpaw followed her into the forest. Birds sung happily. He sniffed the air, he smelt vole. Blacktail had smelt it as well. Slowly, they crept towards the scent. Blacktail nodded slightly to Heartpaw. He spotted the vole through a few blades of grass. He could catch it. He stiffened and swiftly jumped. He felt the vole squirm in his claws and killed it quickly. Blacktail emerged from behind a tree.

"Good job," she said. "Let's get more." By the end of their hunting session, they had caught a vole and two small rabbits. They trotted back to the edge of the hill and rested in the shade of trees. Beestripe and Eelpaw joined them, congratulating them on their catch. Finally, Deerpaw and Moorpelt joined them. They had caught two rabbits and one pigeon. The put the prey down and nodded for the apprentices to choose first. Heartpaw took his vole. Deerpaw took a rabbit and shared with Eelpaw. Blacktail, Beestripe and Moorpelt took a rabbit to themselves. They ate slowly, relishing the cooling breeze and rest. Soon, they finished eating. Heartpaw was enjoying himself, laying at the top of the hill, feeling the breeze, resting, without any worries. He wished they could stay longer.

Unfortunately, they had already wasted time and night was coming. Moorpelt signaled that it was time to go. This time, the walk was not as long. They marched through the forest and up a slight rocky hill. In the distance, they spotted the Moonstone. Heartpaw's heart beat faster. He had never been to the Moonstone. Pinestar had never taken him. Clawpelt had never taken him. But Blacktail was taking him. It was Deerpaw and Eelpaw's first time as well as they had not been apprentices for too long. Finally, they reached the entrance of the Moonstone. Heartpaw gazed up at the large pile of rocks, forming a sort of cave in front of him. This was the famous Moonstone. He was at *the* Moonstone. He couldn't help but shiver with excitement. A moon had risen in the sky and the sky was dotted by small stars. Moorpelt went first. He leapt into the entrance and was gobbled by darkness. Heartpaw gulped. Deerpaw wiggled her tail then quickly jumped after her mentor. Blacktail nodded for Heartpaw to follow. Taking a deep breath, he crouched and eyed the entrance. He leapt into the dark hole. He landed in darkness. He felt his feet thud onto cold, hard floor. The noise echoed along the tunnel. He couldn't see anything. He stood stock still, slightly scared.

"Move away from the entrance," came a voice, making Heartpaw jump. It was Moorpelt. "Blacktail and the others want to jump in. Heartpaw shuffled towards the sound of Moorpelt's voice. He smelt the sharp cold scent as well as Moorpelt and Deerpaw. Suddenly, another cat landed in the tunnel. Then another, slightly more clumsily. It was Eelpaw. And finally Beestripe leapt in.

"Wait for a moment," Beestripe said. "Your eyes will adjust." Heartpaw looked around. He could finally see slightly. He pricked his ears and sniffed at everything. His hearing and scent would be more useful than his sight. He could only see the outline of the cats and when they were a few steps away, any more and he could only see darkness. They made their way along a tunnel, Heartpaw felt chills run through him. He never thought about going to the Moonstone to talk to StarClan. He wondered why they even needed the Moonstone if StarClan could talk to them from the safety of their dens. Suddenly, Heartpaw entered a larger cave. He felt the walls from each of his sides widen and he looked up. Moonlight flowed through a hole in the ceiling onto a large rock in

the middle of the cave. Heartpaw gasped. This was it. This was the Moonstone. He had made it all the way here. As RiverClan.

"Alright, we're all going to press our noses onto the stone," came Moorpelt's voice, cutting the awed silence. Heartpaw walked towards the stone unsurely then lay on his stomach. He perched forward and glanced both sides. Blacktail was nodded to him. Eelpaw had already touched his nose to the stone and seemed to be asleep. Heartpaw took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He leaned forward and felt the cold stone touching his nose.

He was beside a small stream. The water was clear and at the bottom were small pebbles. Heartpaw bent down, suddenly feeling thirsty. He licked the water. It was cool and refreshing. The sun was shining brightly above Heartpaw and birds sung. Heartpaw felt as if he was in paradise. Suddenly, he spotted the reflection of another cat behind him. He jumped and turned around. Facing him was a young tom. He had green eyes and light orange fur. He smiled softly.

"Hello Heartpaw," he said. Heartpaw was too dumbstruck to answer at first.

"Oh hi," he finally stuttered.

"I am Flickerstar," said the young tom. Heartpaw frowned. He didn't know this cat. He knew he was in StarClan. But who was he talking to? He had never actually been in StarClan like this. This felt..., real. As if he were there physically not just mentally like when he was having dreams. This cat, Flickerstar, looked so real, as if he could reach out and touch him. He reached forward but quickly pulled back. It would seem weird to randomly touch Flickerstar to see if he was real.

"I'm sorry Flickerstar, I don't know you," said Heartpaw.

"I know, Blacktail should've taught you more about RiverClan," said Flickerstar with a small smile. "I was leader before Otterstar and Mothstar and Bushstar and Mintstar and... Thornstar." Heartpaw's eyes were wide. He must be old. But he didn't look old. He looked really young. Like he had just become a warrior. He

looked friendly and active, like an apprentice. Not wise and old, like a leader.

"Do you think leaders should be old to be wise?" asked Flickerstar as if reading Heartpaw's thoughts.

"No...?" Heartpaw answered. Flickerstar laughed.

"I think I'm wise, but as you can see, I am not old," Flickerstar continued. "I led RiverClan a long time ago. Maybe you should ask Blacktail about me. Or maybe Thornstar. I think RiverClan is the best Clan because we don't judge cats. We give them a chance. And I am proud of Thornstar and Reedpelt. Proud that they gave you a chance. Because I think that they made the right choice, to let you into our Clan Heartpaw. Heartpaw, you were the right choice. Which is why I am here today. I am here to welcome you to RiverClan, you are a real RiverClan apprentice. And you will eventually be real RiverClan warrior. But right now, I Flickerstar of StarClan, welcome you to RiverClan, my Clan. And I know you will give this Clan all the kindness, bravery and loyalty it deserves and I know you will serve your Clan well. Heartpaw of RiverClan, it was nice meeting you..." Heartpaw watched the young warrior in awe. Flickerstar seemed to be a completely different cat. Strong and brave. Loyal and true. Wise and intelligent. A true leader. Heartpaw felt honoured to be in the presence of this cat. Honoured that this cat chose to see him. Honoured to be called Heartpaw of RiverClan.

Heartpaw jolted awake. He looked around. The place was lit by moonlight and quiet.

"What did you dream off?" came a voice. Heartpaw suddenly remembered where he was. Moonstone. He looked around and spotted the dark shape of Eelpaw.

"F-Flickerstar," said Heartpaw, not sure if he could believe it all. Even in the dark, Heartpaw could sense Eelpaw's amazed faced.

"No way!" he gasped. "That's awesome! Flickerstar is like a legend!" Blacktail suddenly padded to Heartpaw's side.

"Hey," she said firmly. "Remember, you must not tell your Clanmates about your dream." Heartpaw ached to tell Blacktail.

"But mine wasn't a prophecy," said Heartpaw.

"But it's for you and you aloe," said Blacktail firmly. Heartpaw sighed.

"But it wasn't a prophecy. I promise! I just met this cat!" Heartpaw said.

"Flickerstar...," whispered Eelpaw.

"Yeah. It wasn't a prophecy! Nothing about my past or my future! Well slightly about my future," Heartpaw said.

"Be quiet, the others are still dreaming," said Blacktail.

"Please, can I tell?" pleaded Heartpaw.

"No," said Blacktail.

"It wasn't a prophecy! It was a welcome," Heartpaw said.

"A welcome?" Blacktail asked unable to contain her own curiosity.

"Yeah!" exclaimed Heartpaw. "Flickerstar appeared to me and welcomed me to RiverClan."

"Flickerstar!" cried Blacktail. "Heartpaw, that is a big deal. One of the most important cats in RiverClan chose to welcome you into RiverClan. We must have made more than the right choice to make you RiverClan."

"So what did Flickerstar do?" asked Heartpaw. Deerpaw yawned and shifted in her position. Slowly, she got up.

"I'll tell you another time, the other's are waking and we must get going soon," said Deerpaw. Beestripe sat bolt right and Moorpelt slowly stretched and got up. Silently, after a pause, all the cats padded out into the tunnel. They walked through the tunnel

and Heartpaw saw Blacktail leap out of the gap. He followed her and landed onto the grass. Crickets chirped and the sky was fully dark. An owl hooted loudly. The six cats stopped outside to look around. The night world was so different from the morning. Things weren't sleeping, things were still lively but in another way. Heartpaw closed his eyes and let the cool wind ruffle his fur.

"We should be going back now," Moorpelt broke the silence. The six cats made their way away from the Moonstone. Blacktail padded next to Heartpaw.

"Flickerstar, was one of the best leaders of RiverClan. Probably the best leader of all the Clans," she told him.

"Everybody knows him!" exclaimed Deerpaw. "How does Heartpaw not know?!"

"Flickerstar welcomed him to RiverClan!" cried Eelpaw, budging in. Beestripe and Moorpelt turned to stare at Heartpaw. Moorpelt shook himself.

"That's great," he nodded. Heartpaw smiled.

"No! Really? Did you really meet him?" exclaimed Deerpaw. Blacktail sighed.

"Deerpaw, do not interrupt," Blacktail said. Moorpelt gave her a warning look and beckoned for her to walk faster. Blacktail and Heartpaw walked behind the group.

"Let's start from the beginning. Before Flickerstar.., no Flickerkit was born, RiverClan had been experiencing a drought. The other Clans claimed some of their water sources to be dry as well but at that time RiverClan depended on the water. They drank, swam, played, hunted and fought in the water. RiverClan was lost without the water. So for many moons, RiverClan tried to hunt on land, they had never done it and food was scarce for them. Then Flickerkit was born to Nutshell and Moosefang. Flickerkit had a sibling, his sister, Marigoldkit. They grew up together in the drought with little food. It was a miracle no other Clan had attacked RiverClan seeing as they were so weak. Then one day, the

sun scorched high up and Marigoldpaw got sick. Flickerpaw tried everything to help her. Went out hunting twice the time he should to get her as much food as he could. He gave up his own water for her. But the medicine cat at that time, Clearwing, could not do anything for Marigoldpaw, they didn't have enough herbs or the right herbs. And before becoming a warrior Marigoldpaw died. Flickerpaw swore he wouldn't let anymore cat die because of the drought. He was only an apprentice but after that promise, he was destined for great things. So he became a warrior, Flickercloud. And he was made deputy. He had, over the extra time hunting for Marigoldpaw, learnt more efficient ways of hunting on land. He soon was able to teach a few cats his ways and one day, after a long day of hunting, he was able to understand everything about hunting on land. He reported this to the leader, Sunstar and she agreed to let him train all the cats in the Clan. It took moons for the whole Clan to understand the concept but finally they were able to hunt decently on ground. Soon, the Clan was a bit more fed. But they were still weak and ThunderClan was something veering into their border and slowly being more threatening. ThunderClan was also experiencing the drought and had not much prey, although more than RiverClan, they were slowly going into RiverClan territory for more food. One day, a battle broke out where the leader, Sunstar, died. ThunderClan took half of RiverClan's territory. Flickercloud was then made Flickerstar, he was young and wasn't sure of himself but he knew he needed to end the drought. He led RiverClan loyally and bravely. Everybody could see his strong leadership but the drought was still going. He had had a dream, of what, nobody knows, but he had to travel far away from RiverClan. He traveled beyond, to the mountains behind us. And when he got back, he found the drought had gone. We don't know how he did it but he saved RiverClan. He arrived just in time when ThunderClan were attacking. He leapt into the middle of the battle, fighting for his Clan, not caring about his life. One of the ThunderClan warrior approached the nursery and leapt onto the top. The rocks above it crumbled into the nursery. Flickerstar didn't hesitate, he plunged in and dragged the queen and her kits out. Just as he managed to push the last kit out of the nursery, StarClan knows why, the whole den came crumbling down. Flickerstar was taken in it. RiverClan had watched in dismay and with wails of sadness, beat ThunderClan off and took back their land. The river was rushing again and water ran

through the streams. Slowly, RiverClan regained their strength and never forgot the kindness of their leader. One of the kits, Otterkit, claimed to remember Flickerstar dragging her out. She later became Otterstar, leader of RiverClan," finished Blacktail.

"Wow," uttered Heartpaw. "But what did he do in the mountains?"

"We don't know," piped in Eelpaw who was listening silently with Deerpaw. "But we thikn he went to see the *mountain* cats."

"Mountain cats?" repeated Heartpaw.

"Yeah," nodded Deerpaw. "They live in the mountains and they hunt eagles."

"We're not sure for sure," Moorpelt put in. "But I am sure that we are reaching RiverClan. And sure enough, they could see the trees of RiverClan. The apprentices bounded on, happy to be home. Heartpaw entered RiverClan territory and smelt it's comforting scent. He raced after Eelpaw and Deerpaw. They were home. They dodged trees and made their way to camp. They slipped in. Their mentors not far behind them scolded them to be quiet. Heartpaw looked around. The Camp was silent. Only three cats were up. Acornheart was resting outside, watching the sky and smiled at the new arrivals. Sparkbelly was on night watch, by the entrance and flicked his tail in greeting to the group of cats. Smallear was accompanying Sparkbelly as night guard. Moorpelt trotted over to Acornheart, telling Deerpaw to go to the apprentice den and get some rest. Blacktail nodded for Heartpaw to follow. He trotted after Deerpaw.

"Moorpelt is only mean to apprentices," huffed Deerpaw as Heartpaw and Eelpaw followed her to the apprentice den.

"Yeah! I've seen him with Acornheart, he even tells her jokes!" exclaimed Eelpaw.

"And with the kits he's so fun," added Heartpaw. "What's with him and Acornheart anyways?" Deerpaw giggled.

"They're brother and sister," said Eelpaw. "But they bicker a lot but in the end Moorpelt always apologises. He's never apologised to me or Deerpaw. Even when he stepped on my tail." Deerpaw laughed. Heartpaw smiled and curled up in his nest.

"Good night," mewed Deerpaw. Eelpaw mumbled something.

"Good night," answered Heartpaw drowsily.

Ch. 10

Heartpaw stared down at the quiet river. His reflection rippled. Blacktail appeared next to him.

"Alright, in a quarter moon, there will be a swimming test," said Blacktail. "We have a quarter moon to prepare for it. Deerpaw and Eelpaw will be doing it as well. This time, it will not include hunting but next time, on your final assessment, it will." This would be the second time Heartpaw would be going swimming. He didn't think he was ready for a test so soon.

"We're going to train hard and you're going to past the test," said Blacktail. "Now get into the water." Heartpaw didn't hesitate, he leapt into the water. He splashed into the water. He felt the water soak his face but he kicked up to the surface. He paddled with his legs slowly. He strained his neck up.

"You're barely above the water," sighed Blacktail. "Look, your whole top of the body, till the tail, needs to be slightly above the water. Like so." Blacktail slipped into the water and swam swiftly around Heartpaw. Her tail was above the water, a long black sleek tail, trailing after Blacktail. Heartpaw watched in amazement. Blacktail seemed to calm and collected. He pushed his back body up.

"You can put your chin in the water, keep your nose above," said Blacktail. Heartpaw lowered his head and let the water tickle his chin. He slowly swam after Blacktail, lifting his tail so it floated behind him on the water. He found it much more relaxing, faster and quieter to swim like that. Blacktail beckoned him to follow her. He swam along the river after Blacktail, getting stronger and better with each push. Soon, he was pushing forward at almost Blacktail's speed. He loved the feeling of the water rushing beside him and the cold feeling of it on his chin but the warm sun on his forehead. He loved feeling his tail so light, trailing after him with no problem and the easiness of paddling and swimming swiftly. He was enjoying it. Maybe the test wouldn't be so bad after all.

"Good job," said Blacktail. "Let's get out at those reeds." Heartpaw managed a small nod. He waited till they reached the reeds and scrambled out of the water. Blacktail slipped out of the water gracefully and quietly, eyeing Heartpaw with amusement. Heartpaw sheepishly returned the look.

"Better," she said with a slight nod. "But not fast enough."

"I almost overtook you!" exclaimed Heartpaw.

"You think that was my fastest? That was the leisurely part." laughed Blacktail. "The stalking part. You will stalk your prey or the fish in the water like that. Slowly and swiftly." Heartpaw gaped.

"Ugh," he muttered, sitting down. The sun warmed and dried his pelt. "I'm never getting faster."

"But you did," pointed out Blacktail. "Get some rest. Come back here in the afternoon, we'll get more practise." Heartpaw nodded, suddenly feeling very hungry. He trotted away, happy for the break.

Heartpaw paddled furiously, trying to keep his body level with the water surface. He could barely see Blacktail as she swam around the next bend. He pushed forward, gritting his teeth. The current was hardly any help. Finally, he spotted her up ahead him once more. She turned around and waited for him. He finally reached her and she shot off once more. He groaned inwardly but pushed himself forward. His feet moved slowly in the water. Finally, he spotted Blacktail, on the bank. He reached it and climbed onto land. He collapsed on the ground, panting.

"Tired?" chuckled Blacktail.

"Y-yeah, no kidding," panted Heartpaw.

"You need to follow the current and led it guide you to go faster," said Blacktail.

"I know, it pushes me forward but not that much," replied Heartpaw.

"That's not what I meant," said Blacktail. "You must not just let it push you. You need to move *with* it."

"Right," Heartpaw huffed as if he understood.

"Let's go back, tomorrow, we train again," Blacktail said. Heartpaw sighed and trailed after Blacktail back to camp.

Ch. 11

Heartpaw stood by the river with Eelpaw and Deerpaw at his side. On the other side were Blacktail, Moorpelt and Beestripe.

"Your first test will be with speed, if you can follow the current," said Moorpelt. "You will swim with the water. Understand? We will be standing where you need to get out." Heartpaw trembled with nervousness.

"Alright, Beestripe will stay here to tell you when to start, I will be at the end when you finish and Moorpelt will be watching you," said Blacktail. She nodded to the apprentices and smiled at Heartpaw before slipping away with Moorpelt.

"Moorpelt is going to judge us!" exclaimed Eelpaw. "He's so harsh"

"I have ears Eelpaw," warned Beestripe. Eelpaw looked down at his paws in shame.

"You're going to do great," whispered Deerpaw into Heartpaw's ear. He nodded without really taking the words in.

"Thanks," he murmured. Finally, Beestripe told the apprentices to get ready.

"Alright, swim!" he said. Heartpaw saw Eelpaw and Deerpaw dash into the water and swiftly swim away. He leapt after them and the cold water shocked him. He was suddenly fully awake and pushed himself to join Eelpaw and Deerpaw. He tried to follow the current and let it lead him. Sometimes, he would accelerate when Heartpaw was able to follow the current but other times Heartpaw was unable to swim with the current. He pushed harder, battling to stay in the correct position. He let his tail trail behind him correctly and pushed his chin under the water. He wondered what Moorpelt was thinking if he was watching him. Probably that he was horrible. He swam and swam, trying to keep Deerpaw and

Eelpaw in his sight but soon they turned a corner and when he finally swam past it, he couldn't see any of them anymore. After what seems liked moon, Heartpaw spotted Blacktail by the bank with Deerpaw by her side. Eelpaw wasn't with them. He sped up, he had probably passed Eelpaw while swimming frantically. He wasn't last! He hauled himself up on the bank and grinned.

"Wasn't too bad," he breathed. Deerpaw smiled.

"Yeah...," she nodded. He turned to the river to see if Eelpaw was coming.

"Oh you're finished," came a voice. Heartpaw swivelled around. Eelpaw stood with a mouse from his jaws. He dropped it and grinned.

"Even got time to catch a mouse," he said. Heartpaw gaped and sighed. So he was last. And extremely slow. Deerpaw shrugged at him.

"Well Heartpaw," said Blacktail. "Good effort." Heartpaw looked away with embarrassment.

"Come on!" cried Eelpaw. "We've got the rest of the day off!" Heartpaw tried to smile and share their enthusiasm as he followed Eelpaw and Deerpaw who were talking excitedly. His shook his fur and droplets of water flew everywhere. He sighed. He hoped at least the effort would count. He followed the two apprentices dully.

"Hey, don't pout," said Eelpaw. "It's fine. You did great." Eelpaw's words stuttered as he said great and Heartpaw felt even more ashamed.

"Yeah," smiled Deerpaw with as much honesty and enthusiasm as she could muster. "Don't worry, your position was good."

"Yeah and considering it was your first test you're pretty good," chipped in Eelpaw.

"You can stop lying," muttered Heartpaw.

"Sorry," apologised Deerpaw which didn't help to lift Heartpaw's spirit. He mumbled an excuse to his two friends and slunk away back to camp. He avoided to talk to anybody and slipped into the den and curled up into his nest, closing his eyes for some rest. Suddenly, something bounded into him. He leapt up and shook himself. He stared down at three cats looking up at him with big round eyes.

"Hi Heartpaw!" smiled Rosekit. Heartpaw took a deep breath.

"Hey," he smiled. "You scared me."

"You didn't hear us?" gasped Dustkit. "We're such good stalkers!"

"Yeah uh great job," said Heartpaw. He couldn't believe he hadn't heard the kits enter.

"Do you want to play with us?" asked Hawkkit shyly. The way he looked up at Heartpaw and the slight shuffling of his feet made him too cute for Heartpaw to decline. He sighed but nodded.

"Sure," he forced himself to say. Hawkkit grinned.

"Did you do well on your swimming test?" asked Rosekit.

"I don't know," Heartpaw mumbled. "Maybe." He followed the kits outside. "Does Stripedfur know about you being out here?" Rosekit nodded.

"Can you bring us out of camp?" asked Rosekit.

"No," Heartpaw said. "Kits aren't allowed to."

"But every kit sneaks out!" cried Dustkit.

"I'm not helping you sneak out," said Heartpaw firmly. "And no kit sneaks out. Ever."

"Eelpaw did, with his sister," whispered Rosekit, looking

around. "But it didn't end well." Heartpaw frowned. He had never realised Eelpaw and Deerpaw were siblings. They were so different and acted like best friends. He realised he didn't even know who their parents were. He sighed. He was such a great friend. He brought the kits to the stream.

"What happened?" inquired Heartpaw, not really listening.

"She died," said Rosekit softly.

"Died?" repeated Heartpaw confusedly. Dustkit nodded. Hawkkit looked away then ambled away. Dustkit and Rosekit shuffled on their paws.

"What happened?" asked Heartpaw.

"You don't know?" asked Dustkit.

"No...," Heartpaw said.

"He used to be ShadowClan, duh," whispered Rosekit into Dustkit's ear.

"What happened?" repeated Heartpaw.

"Eelpaw and his sister, *Mistkit*," whispered Rosekit. "They sneaked out of camp, when they were kits. And they were just going around and Mistkit and Eelpaw went to the river and apparently Mistkit fell in or maybe she jumped in and the current pulled her away and she... she died..." Heartpaw sat with his mouth slightly open. He had never known about this. He realised what a bad friend that made him. He sighed. Now he knew. Eelpaw had a sister. Mistkit. And she had died.

"Why do you want to sneak out then?" asked Heartpaw. "After what happened to Mistkit."

"Because we won't fall into the water," declared Dustkit. Heartpaw rolled his eyes.

"Go join Hawkkit," nudged Heartpaw. Hawkkit was

trotting around in the stream, playing with the water. "Learning to swim at a young age is good." Rosekit and Dustkit ran to the stream and splashed into the water, making Hawkkit grumble about getting his whole pelt wet. Heartpaw watched them and finally brought them back to Stripedfur who thanked him for taking care of them. Finally, he retreated to the apprentice den. Eelpaw was talking to Deerpaw.

"I hope I did well," Eelpaw said. "I mean, I'm sure I did ok but I think at some point the current was pushing me *away* but I don't think Moorpelt noticed. Hopefully not."

"He probably did. He notices everything!" exclaimed Deerpaw.

"Hey guys," piped in Heartpaw. They turned to him, grins on their faces. Heartpaw couldn't bring himself to grin back at Eelpaw. He felt as if Eelpaw might be pretending. Now he knew about Mistkit he felt so bad for Eelpaw.

"Hey! Not pouting anymore?" teased Eelpaw. Heartpaw shook his head.

"What's the matter?" asked Deerpaw.

"You can't still be scared of the assessment, there's nothing you can do know," said Eelpaw.

"No I'm don't really care about the assessment," Heartpaw said.

"Great," said Deerpaw. "So what's the matter with you? You saw a dead cat?"

"No!" cried Heartpaw then laughed. "It's nothing."

"You sure?" asked Eelpaw. "You look... weird." Heartpaw turned serious once more. He shouldn't be laughing when his friend had lost his sister.

"Don't worry Eelpaw. You know I'll always be there for you, right?" Heartpaw said.

"Um yeah thanks," Eelpaw said awkwardly. Deerpaw gave Heartpaw a weird look he didn't understand.

"Well I'm going to see Frogleap. He asked me to help him with something," said Deerpaw with a sigh. "Sucks right?" Eelpaw nodded. Deerpaw slipped out. Heartpaw turned to look at Eelpaw closely. Now that he knew about Mistkit he noticed slight changes in Eelpaw. His eyes were slightly dull, almost sad and his posture wasn't straight.

"What are you looking at?" asked Eelpaw, frowning. "Man, what's wrong with you Heartpaw? You feeling ok? Need to go see Frogleap?" Heartpaw shook his head.

"Heartpaw," called Eelpaw. He looked unstead, like he was about to collapse. Heartpaw rushed to Eelpaw's side to steady him. Eelpaw stumbled away.

"What are you doing?" he said, raising his voice. "Heartpaw, why are you acting this way? ... What happened?" Heartpaw had to tell him.

"I'm sorry," he burst out. "I didn't know. But know I understand and I know. I know." Eelpaw raised his eyebrow.

"About what?" he asked, confused, his brow deepening.

"Mistkit," whispered Heartpaw. Eelpaw frowned.

"Who told you that?" he bristled.

"The er, kits," said Heartpaw.

"So that's why you're feeling all sad and acting weird?" asked Eelpaw.

"You're sad!" exclaimed Heartpaw.

"I'm not," assured Eelpaw, his face turned into a grin. "I was, but I got over it. Mistkit visited me in my dreams, told me about StarClan. After that I knew she was in a great place I didn't

need to worry or be sad anymore." Heartpaw frowned. But Eelpaw had seemed sad.

"But you seemed..., sad," said Heartpaw.

"Did you ever notice that before?" asked Eelpaw pointedly.

"Well no but I'm sorry," Heartpaw protested.

"You're playing jokes on yourself. You never noticed because I'm not sad," said Eelpaw he chuckled. "You're so stupid Heartpaw." Heartpaw looked at Eelpaw with worried eyes. Eelpaw smiled and purred.

"Heartpaw, chill, don't worry about me," he smiled playfully. "I'm fine but I'm wondering, are *you* fine?" Heartpaw nodded.

"But your posture was all..., slanted," Heartpaw realising now how stupid it sounded.

"Yeah I'm feeling really tired," Eelpaw said. "How bout you?"

"Yeah me too, " agreed Heartpaw.

"Let's go to sleep then," concluded Eelpaw. "And please don't talk about Mistkit again. And those annoying little kits! I'm going to have a word with them!" Heartpaw smiled. He curled up in his nest.

"Night," he whispered.

"Night," came Eelpaw's muffled reply.

"Who are your parents?" asked Heartpaw suddenly, feeling slightly ashamed he had never known. He felt as if it was time he got to know his best friend more.

"Softcry and Embergaze," said Eelpaw. Softcry was a white and light cream furred cat with piercing eyes. She was an

awesome fighter and hunter. Embergaze was nothing like Eelpaw. Heartpaw would never have guessed the shy cat was Eelpaw's father.

"I don't talk to them much," admitted Eelpaw. "It feels like when I became an apprentice, I sorta deconnected from them. You know? I mean, I don't really *depend* on them. But I still love them." Heartpaw nodded. He had been with Softcry on a patrol only once and she had smiled and said good morning to him a few times but he had never guessed her to be Eelpaw's mother.

"You should talk to them," said Heartpaw. "Family's important."

"I know, you're right. I did share a bird with them and I told them all about you," said Eelpaw.

"Good things, I hope," said Heartpaw.

"Yeah I wouldn't say bad things bout my best friend," replied Eelpaw with a small smile.

"Who are Deerpaw's parents?" asked Heartpaw.

"Try and guess," said Eelpaw. Heartpaw groaned but played along anyways.

"Smoketail and Rainfeather," he guessed.

"Ha, never. Rainfeather doesn't like Smoketail," giggled Eelpaw.

"Cloudbreeze and... Acornheart?" tried Heartpaw again.

"Nope," laughed Eelpaw.

"Tell me!" groaned Heartpaw.

"Rainfeather and Reedpelt," said Eelpaw.

"The deputy!" exclaimed Heartpaw.

"Yes the deputy," agreed Eelpaw.

"I've never..., oh wait, I have," said Heartpaw. He had seen Deerpaw and Reedpelt talk but he had thought it was all about the Clan or some problems or whatever. He had never guessed it was because he was her father. He sighed, he realised how little he knew about his two best friends.

"Well then, goodnight," said Eelpaw after a while. Heartpaw yawned.

"Good night," he answered.

Ch. 12

Heartpaw and Deerpaw waited for their mentors. They were going to be announced the results of the test the day before. Eelpaw was out on border patrol with Beestripe but Blacktail and Moorpelt would be there soon. Reedpelt was at the fresh-kill pile and smiled at Deerpaw and Heartpaw. He padded over.

"Hey," he smiled. Deerpaw smiled warmly back. He rubbed his cheek against hers in a loving way then turned to Heartpaw. "How you doing?"

"Good thank you," said Heartpaw. It was evident now to him that Reedpelt was Deerpaw's father.

"You look star struck," pointed out Deerpaw.

"I didn't know Reedpelt was your father till now," admitted Heartpaw. "Well,..., last night." Deerpaw laughed and Reedpelt smiled and rolled his eyes.

"Were you so embarrassed of me you never told who your own father was to your best friend?" exclaimed Reedpelt playfully.

"Of course not!" cried Deerpaw. "But there was nothing to say really." Heartpaw agreed.

"Anyways, hope you guys did well on your test, I've got to sort some patrols," sighed Reedpelt, gave one most look of pride at Deerpaw and trotted away. Embergaze lounged in the shadows with Softcry by his side.

"Those are Eelpaw's parents," whispered Deerpaw into Heartpaw's ear. He nodded.

"I know," he said.

"Embergaze is so quiet though. But charming," said Deerpaw. "I wonder where Blacktail and Moorpelt are." Heartpaw

watched the couple in the shadows share tongues. Embergaze whispered quietly to Softcry. Suddenly, Eelpaw burst into the clearing, bounding up to Heartpaw and Deerpaw with a smiled on his face.

"Hey guys! Beestripe said we're getting our results soon," he said. He turned to Softcry and Embergaze who had looked up. Softcry smiled up at her son and Embergaze gazed at him with pride and love.

"Hey mum and dad," he said. Then he added, "wanna share a mouse tonight?" Embergaze nodded.

"Sure honey," smiled Softcry.

"They're so embarrassing," whispered Eelpaw to Heartpaw and Deerpaw.

"I heard that," said Embergaze, making Heartpaw and Deerpaw burst into laughter.

"hey look! Blacktail and the others are coming!" exclaimed Heartpaw, turning to the entrance where Blacktail, Moorpelt and Beestripe were padding towards them.

"Good luck," said Softcry.

"You go son," said Embergaze more softly.

"Thanks," said Eelpaw before running off. Heartpaw was right on his heels. Their mentors stopped in front of them.

"Good morning," said Moorpelt seriously. Blacktail smiled encouragingly to Heartpaw.

"Morning," chorused the three apprentices.

"Right, we're sure you're excited to hear about your results but first we're going to give you a bit of feedback," said Blacktail. The apprentices huffed but Heartpaw was slightly relieved. He didn't want to hear the fact that he had failed. He was sure he had failed.

"Aw come on, can't we do that after?" complained Eelpaw. Softcry padded by and gave him a look. He looked away but closed his mouth.

"Right, since you're so excited, we're going to start with you," said Moorpelt.

"You did well, Eelpaw," said Beestripe. "Of course, your speed was just at the mark of being fast enough, a little slower and it would've been way too slow. You let the current carry you which was good but a few times, your tail was in the water and just dragging you back instead of at the surface. Your paddling though was very good. Good job, I'm proud. You were in rhythm and you had strong and powerful lunges." Eelpaw grinned happily. Deerpaw and Heartpaw whispered congratulations in his hear.

"Who's next?" asked Blacktail.

"Me!" cried Deerpaw.

"Good job Deerpaw on being the fastest. You had a good speed, a very good speed. Your position at all times were perfect although sometimes your hind legs would go slower and lose the rhythm a bit but you would quickly pick it up quickly. I don't think you even noticed and it was a small mistake even warriors make sometimes so good job. You were swift and quiet. Very well one Deerpaw," congratulated Moorpelt. Deerppaw beamed.

"Good job!" cried Eelpaw, flicking his tail at Deerpaw. Heartpaw nodded enthusiastically. Blacktail turned to Heartpaw.

"Heartpaw," she started. "I am aware that you have not had much training in water but your speed was much too slow. Way too slow. Your position was well kept although you were mostly concentrating on your position your movement wasn't very fluid and your position would sometimes fall apart at bends. You were not swift but you were moderately quiet. I will give it to you you have improved greatly since you first started but it wasn't good enough." Heartpaw sighed and Eelpaw and Deerpaw gave him encouraging looks.

"Right," said Moorpelt. "For the final results."

"Yes," agreed Blacktail with a smile. "Deerpaw, you first. You passed with flying colours!" Deerpaw sprang to her feet and cried out in happiness. Heartpaw grinned, happy for her.

"Yes!" she cried.

"You're as good as Reedpelt," added Moorpelt. "Maybe better." He winked. Which was the first time Heartpaw had sen him crack a joke and wink.

"Eelpaw," continued Blacktail. "You did well with only a few mistakes. You passed as well." Eelpaw howled in victory and grinned at Deerpaw and Heartpaw. Heartpaw felt his nerves start as Blacktail turned to him. He had failed. He was almost shivering with anticipation and fear.

"Heartpaw, unfortunately," sighed Blacktail, "you did not pass. You were too slow and your position was not very good. Maybe you were just trying to go as fast as you could, which, sadly, wasn't very fast. I'm sorry to say but we're going to have to practise on your swimming. When your final assessment comes you will retake this test. If you have two fails, you will have to train as an apprentice for two more moons as failing the Starter Swimming Test twice is intolerable." Heartpaw hung his head. There they were, the words that he had failed. He sighed. He knew it had been coming but he hadn't realised how disappointed he would have felt.

"It's not your fault," assured Blacktail. "You did well considering you're a beginner. You'll be prepared for the next one, don't worry." Heartpaw nodded sadly. Eelpaw bumped his head playfully on Heartpaw.

"Hey don't worry, it's just a stupid test," he said. Deerpaw nodded in agreement. Heartpaw couldn't find the strength to fake nod.

"Come on, we are going to start practising right now," said Blacktail and flicked her tail. Heartpaw trailed after her. He brushed out of camp after Blacktail.

"Heartpaw, you're not going to fail the final assessment," assured Blacktail, padding next to Heartpaw. "I'm going to train you to be the best you can be." Heartpaw nodded unconvinced. If he failed the test twice he would be put off becoming a warrior for two more moons and more if he failed even more times. He sighed. He would never pass the test. He was not good at swimming. He couldn't even keep the right position when turning through bends. He huffed, feeling slightly angry now. Blacktail led him to the river bank.

"Just get in and swim. Pretend I'm not here. I'll even leave. Swim however you want. Feel the cool water on your fur, flowing around you. The calm sound of rushing water around you. The cold tickling of it under your chin," said Blacktail. "Be one with the river." Heartpaw frowned but slipped into the water. It's coolness refreshed him. Blacktail smiled.

"I'll leave you alone for now," she said. "you'll see, after this you'll feel much better." Heartpaw doubted it but watched as Blacktail walked away. He started swimming leisurely, not bothering about his position. Nobody was watching him. He felt the water flowing around it. The cool water on his pelt. The feeling of his tail floating behind him. The current pulling him. He moved his feet with it, feeling its relaxing flow. Soon, he was swimming downriver quickly and swiftly, enjoying the feeling of calmness. He didn't care that his position was bad. He didn't care that he had failed the test. He was just relaxing. Chilling down with no worries in the world. It felt awesome. Better than awesome. He grinned. After a while he climbed back onto the bank and shook himself. Water flew everywhere. He lay on the ground and felt its warmth on his pelt. He felt the sun shining brightly on him and smiled blissfully.

"Why didn't you swim like that yesterday?" came a voice. Heartpaw looked up. Blacktail padded towards him.

"Swim like that?" he repeated.

"You're a natural," she told him. "I've never seen you swim like that. Perfect position, swift, quiet and quick. And totally relaxed." Heartpaw frowned. He hadn't even been thinking about

swimming correctly, just swimming.

"So do I pass?" he asked cockily.

"No, the test was yesterday," replied Blacktail with a sigh. "But we're going to work on what you've got so you pass the next one." Heartpaw nodded and stood up. "First, I'll give you a day off for today. Swim as much as you want."

"You won't stalk me?" grinned Heartpaw.

"I'll leave," nodded Blacktail and padded away.

Ch. 13

Sparkbelly padded at the lead while Heartpaw trailed after the patrol. They were headed to ThunderClan border. Smoketail stopped and beckoned Heartpaw forward.

"Come on, you're as slow as Greyspeck," he urged. Greyspeck turned around and hissed. "Chill, I was just kidding." Heartpaw trotted faster. His thoughts were in the clouds. It was green-leaf and his final assessment along with the swimming test was very soon. He had improved greatly in swimming but Blacktail had warned him that the standards were higher now that he was being tested to become warrior.

"Nervous about the assessment?" asked Sparkbelly, looking back. Heartpaw managed a small nod. "Don't worry, you'll do great."

"We'll put in a good word for you if you can keep up," added Greyspeck. Smoketail rolled his eyes. Soon, they could hear the rushing of water and neared the river. He smelt the strong smell of ThunderClan. They saw the large trees behind the river. They stopped at the river bank and Sparkbelly and Smoketail marked the border. They walked along ThunderClan border and Sparkbelly nodded to Heartpaw that it was his turn. Heartpaw quickly marked the border. Suddenly, large ThunderClan warriors emerged. Their muscles rippled under their pelts. Their eyes dug into the RiverClan cats.

"Hello Bumbleheart," mewed Smoketail, talking to a tabby cat. Bumbleheart growled.

"What's the matter?" taunted Sparkbelly. Heartpaw bristled. A cream coloured cat watched Heartpaw then hissed.

"You're that banished ShadowClan cat," he accused.

"Yeah, RiverClan was so weak they took in a traitor," added a grey tom.

"He is RiverClan and we will not let you insult one of us," hissed Smoketail.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" smirked Bumbleheart. Sparkbelly growled and crouched. Greyspeck padded to his side.

"You have no right to talk like that," he declared then to Sparkbelly. "Leave it, there is nothing we can do." he flicked his tail.

"I am the patrol leader," replied Sparkbelly. "We're not leaving now."

"You know this will only bring trouble," replied Greyspeck. Heartpaw watched them, shuffling awkwardly. Smoketail padded to the river bank.

"Your words are empty," he told the ThunderClan. "You cannot cross the river." The ThunderClan cats growled angrily and lashed their tails. Smoketail turned to Sparkbelly and Greyspeck and nodded for them to leave. Heartpaw happily followed Smoketail away from the border. Greyspeck and Sparkbelly trailed behind. Sparkbelly fuming that Smoketail had taken lead.

"It was no use," said Smoketail to Sparkbelly.

"He was insulting RiverClan!" exclaimed Sparkbelly.

"Their words mean nothing to us," replied Smoketail. "Heartpaw needs to get back to camp so he can continue training and we do not need to cause any unnecessary trouble." Sparkbelly grunted. Finally, they reached camp and Heartpaw spotted Blacktail. She was talking to Moorpelt and Deerpaw was lounging further away. Heartpaw turned to Sparkbelly for permission to leave.

"Go join Blacktail," he said. Heartpaw bounded to Deerpaw.

"Hey, finally," she said. "You're back. We've been waiting."

"We're training together?" asked Heartpaw. Deerpaw nodded. Blacktail and Moorpelt padded to their side.

"You two will be training together today," Moorpelt told them. "Come now, we've lost enough time." Heartpaw and Deerpaw followed their mentors out. Deerpaw whispered about how Moorpelt was so strict into Heartpaw's ear. Moorpelt turned around a few times as if he heard but made no comment. Heartpaw told Blacktail and Deerpaw about the patrol of ThunderClan cats.

"Don't pay attention to them," said Blacktail dissmissively. "I understand Sparkbelly but I agree with Smoketail, it was a good idea to leave." They made their way towards a stream. Heartpaw was trotting with excitement. He loved training with Deerpaw or Eelpaw. It was much more fun than the intense training with Blacktail. Finally, they stopped by the stream.

"For Heartpaw, it'll soon be your final assessement," said Moorpelt. "So you're going to prepare with Deerpaw and sometimes Eelpaw. It'll be good practise for Deerpaw as well. We're going to be starting with fishing." Heartpaw slumped. He hated fishing. He hated the waiting. He hated the slippery scales on his paws. He hated the anticipation. He had practised hard with Blacktail and considered himself good enough.

"Right, you are going to be fishing together," said Blacktail. "Heartpaw I know you've never practised this but this is more paws on. Which means you will be wading and swimming around in the water." Deerpaw nodded enthusiastically. Heartpaw frowned. It sounded even harder. To fish with a partner. But it did sound more fun. Deerpaw padded into the stream and lapped some water. Heartpaw followed.

"Have you done this before?" he asked Deerpaw. She nodded.

"It's so fun," she smiled. "Don't worry. One of us looks for the fish and sort of directs it to the other cat. Don't worry, it's really easy. You'll get it in like 2 seconds." Heartpaw nodded unsurely.

"Alright, Deerpaw, position yourself over there," instructed Moorpelt, flicking his tail. Deerpaw trudged to one side of the stream. Blacktail motioned for Heartpaw to move slightly further down and not move.

"Don't move," she told hims sternly then added, "you'll get it easily if you listen and watch." Heartpaw nodded.

"There's one!" cried Deerpaw. She didn't move her feet. She was staring into the water without a flicker of movement. Heartpaw stood as still as possible. Suddenly, Deerpaw shot her front paws out and water splashed everywhere. For a moment, Heartpaw stood without knowing what to do as water splattered across his pelt then Deerpaw started shouting at him.

"It's going to your direction!" she yelled at him. He shook himself and looked down. He spotted a small slivery figure in the water on his left. He lounged his front paw out and felt its sleek scales on his paws. He shuddered and pulled his paw back. Deerpaw scampered to his side and peered at the water. The ripples cleared and the water was still once more. Only grey pebbles glinted at them from the bottom of the stream.

"It's gone," huffed Deerpaw, shuffling back to her position.

"Why did you let it go?" asked Blacktail.

"You touched it!" added Moorpelt, his pelt bristling. Heartpaw sighed.

"I don't know. It sort of surprised me I guess," he mumbled. Blacktail frowned and shook her head.

"Well, try again," she sighed. They waited patiently. Heartpaw's tail twitched with anticipation, he couldn't lose the next one. Suddenly, Deerpaw shot to attention, her ears pricked.

"There's one right here," she reported. Suddenly, she lunged out and flung a sliver shape out of the water. It flipped in the air and Heartpaw stood, waiting to stop the fish if it escaped. It

splashed back into the water and Deerpaw dropped her head into the water. A moment later she emerged with a fish clutched in her jaws. She threw it on the bank near Blacktail and Moorpelt where it wriggled frantically. It wasn't very big but it was better than Heartpaw had done.

"Good one," noted Moorpelt. The fish lay still. Heartpaw grimaced as the sun hit its scales and shone into Heartpaw's eye. He turned away. Deerpaw was looking at the water once more. Soon, she nodded and declared she saw something coming towards them.

"I'm going to direct it to the left side," she told Heartpaw. "Get ready, it'll be cornered." Heartpaw nodded nervously. Suddenly, Deerpaw flung her right paw out and water splashed everywhere. Heartpaw scampered to the left side of the river and saw the fish. It swam between him and the bank. Heartpaw shot his right paw out quickly. He felt its scales against his paw and shuddered. As quickly as he could he pushed it away. It flew high in the air and landed with a loud thud on the other side of the bank. Heartpaw heaved a sigh of relief. He hated feeling the fish wriggling against him. He almost felt bad for it.

"That was great!" praised Deerpaw beaming brightly.

"Yes," agreed Blacktail. "You seemed like you wanted to touch is as little as possible that you flipped it all the way to the other side!" Blacktail laughed and Moorpelt joined him. Heartpaw had never seen Moorpelt laughed and stared unblinkingly.

"What?" Moorpelt said, narrowing his eyes. Heartpaw shrugged.

"Nothing," mumbled Heartpaw. They caught two more fish then headed back to camp. It was to be the Gathering that night. Heartpaw shivered at the thought of going. He hated the stares the other cats gave him. Especially ShadowClan. He wanted to go but at the same time he hoped Thornstar wouldn't chose him. He didn't want to see his former Clanmates. Especially not Honeylight. He padded into the apprentice den where Eelpaw was lounging. He grinned at Heartpaw.

"They just announced who's going to the Gathering," said Eelpaw.

"Who?" asked Heartpaw quickly.

"Sparkbelly, me, Deerpaw, Moorpelt, Beestripe, Wolfstep, Smallear, Cloudbreeze, Mudclaw, Softcry and.... you!" Heartpaw huffed. He felt slightly happy but disappointed at the same time.

"Hey, don't fret, I bet if Thornstar chose you it means he's sure the other Clans won't do anything," said Eelpaw. Heartpaw sighed and slumped into his nest. Just then Softcry poked her head into the den.

"Eelpaw, I heard about today," she said sternly. He shot Heartpaw a look. Heartpaw had no idea what he had done.

"What do you mean?" asked Eelpaw innocently.

"Don't lie," snapped Softcry, sternly. "Beestripe told me. Embergaze and I do not think you should be going to the Gathering."

"Aww come on," said Eelpaw. "Thornstar already said I was going."

"I'm sure others would be happy coming in your place," said Softcry.

"It's not fair!" moaned Eelpaw. Heartpaw was confused and it must have shown on his face as Softcry explained to him what happened.

"Didn't Eelpaw tell you?" she said. "Well, instead of hunting for the elders today, as Beestripe told him. He was climbing trees. Trees!" Softcry rolled her eyes. Heartpaw laughed and Eelpaw rolled his eyes but smiled.

"You shouldn't be going to the Gathering," said Softcry. "But I'll let it roll this time. Next time, I expect you to do as your mentor says."

"Alright, you don't need to treat me like a kit anymore," sighed Eelpaw.

"You're still my kit," snapped Softcry to Eelpaw seriously then turned to Heartpaw and smiled before padding out. Eelpaw rolled his eyes.

"So annoying," he mouthed. Heartpaw grinned.

"You were climbing trees!" he teased. Eelpaw rolled his eyes.

"Hey! It was fun!" protested Eelpaw.

"What was fun?" asked Deerpaw, entering the den.

"Eelpaw climbed trees today instead of hunting for the mentors!" grinned Heartpaw. Deerpaw burst out laughing.

"What's your punishment?" she asked.

"Cleaning ticks....," sighed Eelpaw. "For a moon!" Heartpaw and Deerpaw both giggled.

"The Gathering is soon," said Deerpaw once the laughter had died down. Moorpelt told me to get you guys. The apprentices padded to the camp entrance where the Reedpelt was there, talking to Rainfeather. They smiled when the three apprentices approached them. Deerpaw rubbed her cheek against Rainfeather purring.

"How was training?" asked Reedpelt.

"How was your day?" interrupted Rainfeather, rolling her eyes at Reedpelt. He huffed.

"Great," exclaimed Deerpaw.

"I just wanted to know how training is going," Reedpelt mumbled under his breath.

"You don't need to pressure her," replied

Rainfeather affectionately. She gave Reedpelt a small lick on the cheek. He smiled.

"Right, you ready for the Gathering?" asked Reedpelt.

"Yup," nodded Eelpaw. "Did you hear about the trees?"

"What trees?" asked the deputy.

"Phew," sighed Eelpaw.

"You mean, you neglecting your job to feed the elders?" asked Reedpelt. Eelpaw slumped down and muttered under his breath.

"I was going to later!" protested Eelpaw. Just then Thornstar joined their side. He flicked his tail at Reedpelt.

"We're leaving soon," he stated then turned to the apprentices. "Your mentors tell me you're getting on well." Heartpaw beamed with Deerpaw.

"Don't forget you still are apprentices though," said Thornstar, looking at Eelpaw mostly. "And you still have responsibilities. Like feeding the elders." Eelpaw shuffled uncomfortably on his feet. Moorpelt, Blacktail and Beestripe trotted to join the cats. Wolfstep joined them a few moments later until a whole group of cats was gathered.

"Alright, let's go," said Thornstar. Heartpaw followed Thornstar and Reedpelt with Eelpaw and Deerpaw next to him. They slunk through RiverClan. Heartpaw breathed in the cool air and relished the breeze on his pelt. Soon, they reached the Four Trees. ThunderClan was already there. They watched RiverClan and a few came forward to greet some of the RiverClan warriors. Eelpaw trotted towards a group of three apprentices. Deerpaw trotted after him and Heartpaw trailed after them unsurely.

"Hey!" cried Eelpaw. "I'm Eelpaw."

"I'm Deerpaw," cut in Deerpaw. "And this is Heartpaw." Heartpaw gave a small smile and flick of the tail at the ThunderClan apprentices. One of them was black. The other was black and white and the last one was dark grey.

"I'm Blizzardpaw," put in the grey tom. He smiled shyly at Deerpaw who beamed back at him.

"I'm Webpaw," said the black and white tom. His gaze lingered on Heartpaw. "And this is Blackpaw. He doesn't really like to talk." Blackpaw showed his fangs but didn't make a sound. "You're the one from ShadowClan right?"

"Um..., I'm RiverClan," stammered Heartpaw.

"But you used to be ShadowClan right?" pressed Blizzardpaw.

"Yeah but he's loyal to RiverClan now," declared Eelpaw. Heartpaw was grateful for the support of his friend.

"My mentor told me not to talk about you," said Blizzardpaw. "But what did you do to betray your Clan?"

"His Clan is RiverClan," said Deerpaw. "He betrayed ShadowClan. He'd never betray RiverClan." Eelpaw nodded. Suddenly, WindClan and ShadowClan arrived. Heartpaw felt the familiar smell flare in his nostrils. He backed away and Eelpaw and Deerpaw followed him back to RiverClan. They joined the other warriors and their mentors. ShadowClan slunk past them. Their eyes pierced Heartpaw, glaring at him with hatred. He recognised all of them. He shivered. It was like his past was coming back for him. He saw Thistlenose muttering under his breath to a beautiful cream coloured cat. Honeylight. He saw Featherflame, Rabbitleap, Clawpelt, Spiderfur and Sorrelclaw, all huddled together. He looked away and kept his head high. Then behind the cluster of ShadowClan cats he spotted shapes he recognised. Flamekit and Dawnkit. They had grown so much. He sighed. The leaders leapt up and cried for silence. Heartpaw shuffled nearer to

the group of RiverClan. Thornstar padded forward.

"RiverClan, is thriving," he announced. "There is plenty of prey and our kits are growing well." Then Falconstar took a step forward.

"ThunderClan has four new kits, Stonekit, Moonkit, Nightkit and Spottedkit," declared Falconstar then scanned the cats below him before slipping into the shadows. Fawnstar was next. She padded up and waited for the cries and cheers for ThunderClan died down. Heartpaw didn't bother cheering and neither did Deerpaw or Eelpaw. ThunderClan didn't concern them.

WindClan's hunting has been plenty. Prey is literally running into our paws," said Fawnstar. "We are stronger than ever." Her last words seemed like a threat as she marched away. Finally, Cinderstar stepped forward. Heartpaw fixed his eyes on her. She was a different leader than she had been. Her fur was slightly longer and dirtier. Her eyes were sharper but wiser and her stance showed she knew what she was doing. She looked down at RiverClan and fixed her eyes on Heartpaw. She flexed her muscles and Heartpaw couldn't help but break her gaze. She then turned back to the whole gathering of cats.

"ShadowClan's kits are striving. They are growing up stronger and faster then normal. Soon, they will be apprentices. We have two new apprentices, Flamepaw and Dawnpaw. ShadowClan's hunting has been good and we did get into a scuffle with ThunderClan," Cinderstar looked pointedly at Falconstar who bristled. Her voice was loud and strong, almost like Pinestar's. Heartpaw gulped. He turned to see the two new apprentices, looking his way. He broke their glance to look back at Cinderstar.

"Of course, we won and ThunderClan fled, and hopefully understand now they shouldn't mess with ShadowClan," Cinderstar hissed more than talked. Falconstar lashed his tail and a few cries of anger and protest rang out from ThunderClan. A few warriors stood up. ShadowClan turned to face ThunderClan and hissed back, cheering for Cinderstar.

"Enough," called Falconstar, he took a step towards

Cinderstar. "This was not the time to bring that up." He growled.

"It is a Gathering, I am to share what is happening to my Clan," shrugged Cinderstar. Falconstar narrowed his eyes and hissed but didn't say anything. He swivelled around.

"ThunderClan, we are going," he ordered. He jumped off the rock and swept past RiverClan without glancing at them then past ShadowClan, pretending they didn't exist. ThunderClan cats filed after him, growling softly. Soon, they were gone and Cinderstar shrugged.

"Well, ThunderClan are cowards," she said. Heartpaw had never heard her talk like this. Cinderstar never talked badly about any other Clan. He remembered her as a passive and smart young warrior. Now she looked more like an angry leader filled with hatred. He frowned. He remembered when he had insulted ThunderClan. She had told him gently not to. Never underestimate your enemy. He remembered her words clearly. He had listened to her. He looked back at Cinderstar who was stalking back to her Clan. She had changed so much. And as she returned to her Clanmates, the looks on their faces showed they knew it too. Deerpaw was prodding Heartpaw on the ribs.

"Ow," he winced. "What's that for?"

"Are you listening?" she sighed exasperated. "Come on, let's go talk to the WindClan apprentices." Heartpaw didn't want to.

"Go ahead," he urged her and Eelpaw. They shrugged and trotted off. Heartpaw saw the ShadowClan group disperse to talk to others but mostly stayed amongst themselves. He spotted Flamepaw and Dawnpaw huddled in the corner whispering to themselves. He approached them, ducking away from other ShadowClan cats' view. He padded up to them and they looked up. They watched him, he couldn't read their expressions on their face.

"Hey, congratulations on becoming apprentices," said Heartpaw.

"Thanks," piped in Flamepaw. Duskpaw just eyed him.

"Um yeah, it was nice seeing you," said Heartpaw, turning away.

"Wait, it's nice seeing you again," whispered Duskpaw. Heartpaw turned back to them. They watched him nervously. And he realised something else..., respect. And admiration.

"I remember you," said Duskpaw. "Um.., I mean, when you were in ShadowClan." Heartpaw nodded awkwardly.

"Oh um yeah, me too," replied Heartpaw, clearing his throat. He shuffled on his paws. The two new apprentices in front of him pressed against himself more tightly.

"Roselight said you almost saved Briarkit," said Duskpaw.

"Oh...," trailed off Heartpaw. He remembered. He shivered at the thought. The image of the cold blooded ThunderClan cat send shivers through his spine. The smalle shape of Briarkit, so helpless. She hadn't deserved it. "I'm sorry.."

"Thanks," said Flamepaw. "Thanks for going out there to save her."

"I er..," Heartpaw was lost for words. He didn't know if they were mad at him or not.

"Yeah, Roselight says that you did your best and it wasn't your fault and we're grateful for you. For going out there and not letting her drown. It wasn't your fault she went to StarClan. It was ThunderClan's," added Duskpaw. Heartpaw gave a feeble smile. He remembered seeing Briarkit in the river. Her terrified cries. He remembered bringing her to safety, giving her comfort. But he had still failed.

"Heartpaw!" shouted Deerpaw. "We're leaving."

"Coming!" called back Heartpaw, he turned away. "Bye." The two apprentices nodded goodbye as well. Heartpaw trotted to the comfort of his Clan. He joined them and together they slipped away.

Ch. 14

Heartpaw sunk into his comfortable nest. He listened to some of his Clanmates, talking softly. Deerpaw and Eelpaw were fast asleep. He wrapped his tail around his snout and closed his eyes. His Clanmates slipped into the warrior den and silence followed. He smiled blissfully, listening to the calm silence. An owl hooted loudly. A soft breeze blew into the apprentice den and ruffled his fur.

Heartpaw looked up. He looked around. He was near a river. It rushed by quickly. He looked down at the reflection. He frowned. He saw other cats standing beside him. He swivelled around. Nobody was in sight. He was alone. He frowned and turned back to the river. There were cats staring back at him, including his own reflection. He shiver of fear tingled through him. He saw Brightheart. Her warm gaze fixed on him. It warmed his heart but on his other side was a dark grey cat, his eyes sharp and piercing. The cat Heartpaw had loved the most. Had looked up the most to. But now, this cat gave him shivers and cold fear spread through him. Stormpelt. He blinked. Stormpelt wasn't looking at him. He was looking at a cat a bit further away. He frowned. He saw recognised her. She was a golden tabby and smiled at him happily. He knew her. She was ShadowClan, Goldenheart. But what was she doing here? She wasn't supposed to be in StarClan. Cinderstar hadn't said anything about Goldenheart. Had she? Heartpaw raked his brain. On Cinderstar's side were two cats. No, kits. They were kits. He stared at them. There was something familiar about them. They both had the eyes of Stormpelt. Light blue, almost grey, dull but beautiful. One of them was a she-cat. She had light brown and white ruffled fur which was messy and puffy. She looked a bit like Goldenheart. The other cat had well groomed fur and sharp eyes. He looked exactly like Stormpelt. His fur was grey and his snout was held high. Goldenheart's reflection was beside them.

"Heartpaw," whispered a soft voice. Heartpaw jumped around. His eyes softened when he saw it was Brightheart. Her eyes were filled with love and sadness. She padded to his side and gave him a small affectionate lick. "I'm so sorry Heartpaw."

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Why?"

"I'm so sorry...," whispered Brightheart. "So so sorry."

"Brightheart, what happened?" asked Heartpaw confused. He didn't want Brightheart to be sad, it hurt his heart.

"I'm sorry for what's going to happen to you. I'm sorry about Stormpelt." She looked at him with a gaze so filled with love Heartpaw wanted to stay with Brightheart forever.

"Stormpelt? Oh.., it's ok. I erm, I'll get over it," Heartpaw said, finally understanding. She was talking about Stormpelt disowning him.

"Come," said Brightheart. She flicked her tail and stood next to the river. "I think you know her." She nodded to Goldenheart. Heartpaw nodded. "Goldenheart. A great warrior. And I don't think you know those kits." Heartpaw shook his head. They looked familiar though.

"I feel like I should know them," frowned Heartpaw.

"That is Birdkit," said Brightheart. She was looking at the she-cat. "And that is Blizzardkit." Heartpaw frowned. He suddenly recalled something. The memory was distant. He tried to grab it. And suddenly, he remembered. He remembered Cinderstar saying they had two new kits. Blizzardkit and Birdkit.

"They are Stormpelt and Goldenheart's kits," said Brightheart, acknowledging Heartpaw's thought. No. It couldn't be. His eyes filled with tears. He didn't want to believe it.

"H-how? W-why?" whimpered Heartpaw, his voice broke. He knew Stormpelt thought Heartpaw had betrayed him but why had he betrayed Brightheart?

"I should have know, I'm sorry," said Brightheart gently. "He was always reckless. I mean, he was mates with Gingerfern and Sandwing... I should have known when he had chosen me it wouldn't last. I'd seen it with other cats. I'm sorry Heartpaw."

"But he always said he would stay with you forever. He loved you," protested Heartpaw like a stubborn kit. He sat down, his paws shaking.

"He did but..., it's just him. He couldn't help it," said Brightheart.

"Those are his kits," said Heartpaw almost to himself. "Those are the kits he wants instead of me. Goldenheart is the cat he wants instead of... you." Brightheart looked away.

"Heartpaw, it is not time to mourn for me," said Brightheart. "Stormpelt is my problem. He is in my Clan now. StarClan. But Blizzardkit, Birdkit and Goldenheart are your problem.

"What do you mean?" asked Heartpaw.

"Oh Heartpaw..., Blizzardkit is destined for great things. Great things. And Stormpelt has charged him with one thing to do," said Brightheart.

"What is it?" asked Heartpaw.

"To kill you."

Ch. 15

Sharp teeth bit into Heartpaw's ear. He rolled away and sprang to his feet. He lashed out his right paw.

"Hey, chill," said Eelpaw, looking at Heartpaw with wide eyes.

"Oh," said Heartpaw. "It's just you."

"Uh yeah, who'd you think it was?" asked Eelpaw. "ShadowClan?" He rolled his eyes. Heartpaw shook himself and yawned. He followed Eelpaw out of the apprentice den. He looked around, the camp was empty and quiet.

"Blacktail, Moorpelt, Beestripe and Deerpaw went out on a patrol," explained Eelpaw. "Let's eat." Heartpaw shrugged and followed Eelpaw towards the fresh-kill pile. Eelpaw picked a small sparrow and they trotted down towards the stream together. They shared the sparrow, eating hungrily. Heartpaw licked his mouth and trotted down to the stream for a drink when he had finished the bird. He remembered the dream he had had that night. He shuddered at the thought. How could Blizzardkit kill him when he was in a Clan which didn't even share borders. Plus Blizzardkit was just a kit. Heartpaw didn't feel very threatened. He only felt sad. Sad that Stormpelt had betrayed him. But mostly, sad that Stormpelt had betrayed Brightheart. He couldn't believe it. All the time he had been so happy to see Stormpelt when he came back from patrols and from his duties. And Stormpelt had been so nice to him, kind, loving, caring. Stormpelt had treated Heartpaw as his kit but all that time he had been with Goldenheart. And they had kits together. Heartpaw growled. Eelpaw stood behind him.

"You ok?" asked Eelpaw concerned.

"Yeah," assured Heartpaw.

"Why're you randomly growling?" asked Eelpaw.

"I.. didn't- growl," Heartpaw said. Eelpaw shrugged.

"If you say so..," frowned Eelpaw. "Come on, I think our mentors are back." Heartpaw trotted beside Eelpaw and they pushed past a bush into the clearing. Indeed, Deerpaw, Beestripe, Moorpelt and Blacktail had just come back from a border patrol and were talking to Reedpelt. Reedpelt flicked his tell lovingly to Deerpaw then padded away. Blacktail spotted Heartpaw and smiled. She beckoned to him. He joined her side and smiled at Deerpaw. She smiled back and followed Moorpelt out of camp once more.

"Heartpaw, I have very exciting news," said Blacktail. "I know you're just over twelve moons old aren't you?" Heartpaw nodded. "Well, you're going to have your final assessment soon." Heartpaw beamed.

"When?" he asked.

"A quarter moon," said Blacktail. Heartpaw's jaw hung. He wouldn't be ready!

"I won't be ready!"exclaimed Heartpaw.

"Yes you will, I was the one who suggested to make it earlier. It was supposed to be in half a moon. So please don't disappoint me," Blacktail said. "Come on." She slipped out of camp and Heartpaw followed her, bewildered. They stopped at the river.

"Right, today I will pretend to test you on your fishing. Then tomorrow we'll do hunting. The next day some stalking and tracking. And then some fighting. Then we'll do a bit of climbing and finally swimming and you'll be ready," explained Blacktial. Heartpaw gulped. It sounded like a lot.

"Right, let's start, position yourself," Blacktail said. Heartpaw crouched near the river and brought his front right paw out slightly so he could bring it quickly down into the water to catch any passing fish. He fixed his eyes on the water and made

sure he was in a comfortable position as he might be staying like that for a long time. He waited, listening to his breath. Suddenly, he saw a flash of silver. Without thinking, he dug his paw into the water and cupped it. He felt the scaly fish against his paw, wiggling frantically. Swiftly, he flipped it out of the water and a silvery shape flew out of the river. Heartpaw turned back to see the fish jumping around on the grass. He shivered as he saw its empty black eyes.

"Good one!" praised Blacktail. "Now let's get into the water." She nodded for Heartpaw to go into the river. He slipped in and swam along, looking for fish. By now, he knew how to hunt although he wasn't exceptional at it. He suddenly saw a flicker and anchored his paws to the sand bed on the bottom of the river. He waited and fish slithered towards him. He brought out his front paw and flicked it. It flew out of the water then splashed back further along the river. Heartpaw watched in dismay as it quickly swum away.

"Don't hesitate and make sure your movement is quick and swift, you hesitated it had enough time to sort of move away," explained Blacktail. Heartpaw nodded. He hadn't realised he had hesitated but he still didn't like the feel of the wriggling fish against his paw. He waited once more.

"You're becoming a warrior!" exclaimed Deerpaw. Heartpaw nodded, grinning. "I'm so happy for you! You'll tell us all about the assessment right? So we know what it's going to be like." Heartpaw nodded.

"'Course," he assured her. They were sitting in a circle in the middle of the apprentice den, eating a salmon.

"You'll remember us though?" Eelpaw said, not sharing much of the happiness. Deerpaw nudged him.

"Why are you so gloomy?" she prodded. "You should be happy."

"Why would I ever forget you?" exclaimed Heartpaw to Eelpaw. "You're my best friends."

"And only friends," added Deerpaw cheekily. Heartpaw rolled his eyes.

"Well, good luck then," said Eelpaw.

"It's in a quarter moon, we're going to be training harder than ever," said Heartpaw.

"Are you nervous?" asked Eelpaw.

"Of course!" said Heartpaw. "But if Blacktail says it's fine, it'll be fine." Deerpaw nodded.

"Blacktail is a really good mentor," she nodded.

"She is," agreed Heartpaw.

"You alright? Don't think I'm not happy for you, I am, I really am," assured Eelpaw suddenly. Heartpaw nodded. He still felt slightly confused and sad about the dream he had had the night before but now he had more pressing things on his mind, the assessment.

"You seem distracted," said Eelpaw.

"Well of course," said Deerpaw. "I mean, he's going to become a warrior soon."

"We're not sure yet," said Heartpaw. "I might fail." Deerpaw laughed.

"Of course you won't!" she said.

"Don't say that!" said Heartpaw. "It's bad karma. If you say I'll surely pass I won't."

"I don't believe in that," said Deerpaw, rolling her eyes. "I say, if you say you can do something, you can do it."

"Do you know what happened today?" said Eelpaw suddenly, trying not to laugh.

"What?" chorused Deerpaw and Heartpaw.

"We were going to cross the river," said Eelpaw. "And there were fish passing under the bridge and and - and B-Beestripe..." Eelpaw burst out laughing uncontrollably.

"Tell us already!" Deerpaw said.

"Yeah well, I was crossing and and- I told Beestripe and like," Eelpaw chortled. He tried to open his mouth to say more but started trembling with laughter. "And like, I was like, should I catch one? And Beestripe said... He said he'd-" Eelpaw was laughing on the ground, unable to talk. Deerpaw and Heartpaw watching in amusement and frustration. They both wanted to know why Eelpaw was laughing that loud.

"Well, he said he'd show me how to do it," continued Eelpaw after a slight pause. "And." Eelpaw coughed. "And he crouched down, like really well and professional and cool like-" Eelpaw giggled, as if watching the scene once more. "And then one fish came down and he swiped his paw out. And he caught the fish. And it flew out." Heartpaw and Deerpaw nodded Eelpaw on. "And then Beestripe leaned forward..." Eelpaw started to laugh one more. "And he- he-" Deerpaw and Heartpaw leaned forward.

"Say it already!" said Heartpaw.

"He fell in!" gasped Eelpaw. Then he fell to the ground, laughing hysterically. Heartpaw and Deerpaw burst out into laughter. The image of Beestripe, leaning forward them suddenly tumbling into the water replayed in Heartpaw's mind.

"No way!" said Deerpaw, between breaths.

"I'm no joking!" Eelpaw giggled.

"What are you laughing about?" came a voice. Heartpaw, who had his eyes bunched up closed as he laughed replied, "Beestripe fell into the river." The three apprentices burst out into more hysterical laughter once more.

"Did he really?" came the voice. "And who

told you this?"

"Well me obviously," came Eelpaw's reply as he slowly got up. "I was with him. Obviously I couldn't laugh then but I did right after when he wasn't looking."

"How nice," the cat replied. Heartpaw pricked his ears and suddenly turned serious. He shot up and stared at Beestripe. Beestripe was watching them, unamused by the apprentice den entrance.

"Beestripe!" gasped Heartpaw.

"Yes, the same Beestripe, I assume, that you were just talking about," said Beestripe. Eelpaw sat up, his eyes widening. He looked around nervously. Deerpaw crept to her nest and hid behind the leaves.

"I was just about to tell you that I need you to do Floodwhisker's fleas. I was going to tell you to do it quick and that you'd have tomorrow morning off but I think I've changed my mind," said Beestripe thoughtfully. Eelpaw gulped fearfully. "You can do Floodwhisker and Pidgeonfeather's fleas and tomorrow morning before dawn you can go bring them new bedding and you can also babysit the kits in the afternoon, which I was also planning on giving to you off." Eelpaw slumped down but nodded grimly.

"It's ok Eelpaw, we'll help," whispered Deerpaw.

"Are you serious?" said Beestripe suddenly, he grinned widely. "I'm just kidding!" Eelpaw gave Heartpaw a wide, scared but amused look. Heartpaw shrugged back.

"I think it was pretty funny that I fell in as well," Beestripe said, beaming.

"I think it was too," murmured Eelpaw underneath his breath.

"Well then, I'll let you three to it," said Beestripe.

"Wait, do I have to do the elder's ticks?" asked Eelpaw.

"No, unless you want to," said Beestripe with a shrug. Eelpaw shook his head quickly. Beestripe nodded thoughtfully. "I thought so." He then padded out of the den and Heartpaw glanced at Deerpaw and Eelpaw with wide eyes. Then they all burst out into laughter.

Ch. 16

Heartpaw shivered with nervousness. He stood in front of Blacktail and Moorpelt. Deerpaw and Eelpaw were watching a few bushes away, their faces showed their excitement. Heartpaw though, id not share their excitement. He just wanted to crawl into a nest and stay hidden forever.

"This is your last test," said Moorpelt, his voice stony. The river beside Heartpaw gurgled loudly to emphasise this. "The swimming test you did last time." Heartpaw nodded numbly.

"You will swim till you see Moorpelt," said Blacktail. "You will imagine that you are tailing a fish. And you will get out of the water quietly and will crouch as if to hunt." Heartpaw nodded.

"Right then, let's start," said Moorpelt. Moorpelt trotted along the river. He motioned with his tail for Deerpaw and Eelpaw to follow him. Blacktail turned to Heartpaw.

"You're going to do great, alright?" she said. "Don't disappoint me." Heartpaw cringed, Blacktail was not making the nerves any better. "Alright then, get into the water." Heartpaw walked to the side of the river and slowly slipped into the water. A cold rushed through his body and he swiftly started to paddle. He made his way down the river, his brain was muddled. He was thinking about his position and what Blacktail was thinking and the consequences of failing. He had failed last time. He could fail again. He pushed on, trying to shove back the back thoughts. I can do this. I can do this. It's just a stupid swimming test. Finally, he spotted Moorpelt on the bank. He wanted to rush out of the water and shake himself. He wanted to shout for joy. But then he remembered he needed to get out of the water quietly and crouch as if to hunt. Slowly, he waited till he was next to Moorpelt and slipped out of the water quietly. He crouched low, aware that he was shivering with cold.

"Alright," said Moorpelt finally. "It's good." Heartpaw

relaxed and turned around. He spotted Deerpaw and Eelpaw in the bushes not far away. They both flashed him encouraging grins.

"How did I do?" asked Heartpaw.

"I can't tell you now. You'll know tonight," informed Moorpelt. He padded away. Heartpaw watched him leave with wide eyes. Moorpelt was not helping with the nerves. In fact, he was making Heartpaw even more nervous and pessimistic. He sighed and slumped to the ground. He would be an apprentice forever.

"Heartpaw, you have the rest of the afternoon off," said Blacktail, emerging from behind some trees. She smiled at him comfortingly. "Don't worry too much, will you?" Heartpaw managed a weak nod. Deerpaw and Eelpaw joined his side.

"You were great! You're going to become a warrior," said Deerpaw happily.

"Yeah! Don't be so stressed out," agreed Eelpaw. Heartpaw smiled, grateful for their encouragement.

Heartpaw looked up at where Thornstar stood. He was quivering with excitement. Thornstar looked down at him.

"Heartpaw, please step up," Thornstar said. Heartpaw hesitated but Eelpaw and Deerpaw squeaked excitedly and pushed him forward. He padded past all the cats gathered around and leapt up next to Thornstar. He looked down at all the cats watching him. He felt a certain pride but nervousness as well. He could still have failed. He joined Thornstar's side. Thornstar's eyes glowed with pride and happiness. This must mean something good. Heartpaw couldn't help but puff out his chest although his paws were shaking like crazy.

"I, Thornstar, leader of RiverClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. He has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend him to you as a warrior in his turn," announced Thornstar. Heartpaw felt a burst of happiness and pride. He puffed out his chest more and turned to the gathering of cats, wanting to burst with joy. The cats

watched him with a mixture of happiness and excitement. Deerpaw and Eelpaw flashed Heartpaw encouraging looks. Heartpaw was now shivering with excitement and joy instead of nervousness. Thornstar turned to Heartpaw and Heartpaw was barely able to keep eye contact with him. Thornstar took a step forward and beamed brightly at Heartpaw.

"Heartpaw, do you promise to uphold the the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" asked Thornstar. Heartpaw couldn't believe it. He was becoming a warrior. He had seen this ceremony many times. And now, this ceremony was for him. To become a full warrior of RiverClan. He couldn't believe it! He wanted to dance with joy. He wanted to shout at the top of his lungs. He quivered with excitement as he opened his mouth to say "I do". To promise that he would be loyal to RiverClan. Heartpaw knew this would seal his fate. He was officially RiverClan. Nothing could change it. And he was proud.

"I do," Heartpaw promised firmly. His voice rang out loud and clear. He was sure. This was where he was meant to be. He would serve RiverClan till he died. He would die serving RiverClan. Thornstar nodded his approval.

"Then by the powers of , I give you your warrior name. Heartpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Heartstorm. StarClan honors your loyalty and bravery, and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan," declared Thornstar. Hearstorm turned to face the RiverClan cats. They burst into joyous cheers. They chanted his name. Again and again.

"Heartstorm! Heartstorm! Heartstorm!" they howled happily. He spotted Eelpaw and Deerpaw bouncing up and down. Heartpaw stepped down and cats gathered around him, congratulating him. Calling out his new name. He shivered. His mind flickered to Stormpelt. Why had Thornstar chosen to name him Heartstorm? But he didn't have time to dwell on it. His Clanmates' happiness flooded through him and he laughed out happily. Eelpaw and Deerpaw pushed past the crowd of cats and walked beside Heartpaw.

"Heartstorm!" exclaimed Eelpaw. "I hope I have a cool name like that."

"Yeah, I kinda like Deerstorm," grinned Deerpaw.

"Or Eelstorm," said Eelpaw. Heartstorm laughed. "We're so happy for you. Congratulations. You're a warrior!"

"I can't believe it! You're so lucky! But of course, you obviously passed the test! I mean, you're awesome," said Deerpaw.

"Thanks guys," said Heartpaw, touched. Blacktail padded to him.

"Congratulations Heartstorm. I always knew you would be a great apprentice the first time I lay eyes on you," smiled Blacktail. Heartpaw beamed back, feeling pride flow through him. Somehow, not letting Blacktail down meant more to him than anything.

"You were the best mentor I've ever had!" cried Heartstorm gratefully. "And I've had a few." Blacktail smiled at him and flicked her tail to the warrior's den.

"There's an extra nest near the back, just for you," she said. "I knew you wouldn't disappoint me." Moorpelt trotted up to Heartstorm with Softcry, Embergaze, Reedpelt and Rainfeather in tow. They all beamed at him.

"Good job Heartstorm," winked Moorpelt. Heartpaw couldn't stop beaming.

"You're going to be a great warrior," said Reedpelt with a dip of the head then he trotted of to join Deerpaw. Rainfeather and Softcry congratulated Heartstorm as well.

"ShadowClan would be jealous," said Embergaze in a soft voice. His eyes sparkled. Heartstorm watched as Embergaze slipped away. He felt like he couldn't have been happier. This might just be the happiest moment of his life. He trotted to the warrior's den where Sparkbelly and other warriors surrounded him, talking excitedly and congratulating him. He was a RiverClan warrior.

Ch. 17

Heartstorm entered the warrior's den. It was a large cave with a sandy floor. Big nests of moss were laid everywhere. It was gigantic. Heartstorm took in the new smells. Sparkbelly led him to his new nest at the end of the den.

"You know everybody right?" Sparkbelly asked pointedly. Heartstorm looked around. Most warriors were curled up in their nests sleeping or resting. Heartstorm saw Moorpelt, Blacktail, Embergaze, Beestripe, Softcry, Applenose, Reedpelt, Rainfeather, Mudclaw, Cloudbreeze, Smallear, Greyspeck, Smoketail, Wolfstep and Acornheart. There was only one cat he rarely saw and that he had never talked to. He frowned. He had only seen that cat a few times. She had light grey fur and looked quite small.

"Who's that?" asked Heartstorm. "I can't believe I don't know her."

"It's alright," said Sparkbelly. "She keeps to herself most of the time. She never goes on border patrols. Only on hunting patrols and she hunts by herself. She's mostly out of the forest when it isn't night or she's in her nest." Heartstorm gazed at the she cat at the other side of the den. She looked peaceful.

"Her name's Silverdrop," said Sparkbelly in a low voice.

"She looks.., young," whispered Heartstorm.

"She is... Only about thirteen moons, maybe less," said Sparkbelly. "Youngest warrior. We don't really know how she ended up here..., well, some of us do. Only Thornstar and Frogleap but they won't tell us. But she's been warrior for as long as she's been here. And a really good one, if she'd just be a bit more social."

"Almost like Embergaze," pointed out Heartstorm.

"No. I mean, Embergaze doesn't talk much but he isn't

antisocial. He prefers listening. He doesn't waste words. Only uses them when necessary," explained Sparkbelly then yawned. "Anyways, I'm gonna sleep now. Good luck on your vigil. Goodnight and congratulations, Heartstorm." Heartstorm nodded and watched Sparkbelly slip into his nest and curl his tail over his snout. Heartstorm stepped out of the den and wished he was back in the apprentice den with his best friends. He missed them deeply. It was a bit like an ache in his heart. He felt scared. He was a warrior. He didn't feel like he fit in. He was in the same den as Blacktail! His former mentor! His eyes wandered to her. She was sleeping peacefully. Heartstorm settled down in the middle of camp, watching the stars and the moon, setting vigil. The night was quiet. Calm. With a sigh, Heartstorm put his head in his paws and closed his eyes. It took a long time before sleep washed over him.

Heartstorm woke up lat after sunrise. He looked around and trotted to the warrior's den. Only Greyspeck and Wolfstep remained talking in the warrior's den. He quickly trotted out of the warrior's den. Many warriors were walking around camp or talking in groups. Heartstorm couldn't remember a day he had awoken this late. It felt weird. He looked around for Blacktail then remembered she wasn't his mentor. He felt lost, not knowing what to do.

"Wondering what to do?" came a soft voice. Heartstorm turned around. He came face to face with Embergaze. "Don't worry, feeling lost is normal. You can go ask Reedpelt to join a hunting or border patrol. Then you can go out if you want, see the elders, the kits or just hang around here." Heartstorm nodded.

"Thanks," he said and headed for Reedpelt who was near the medicine den talking to Frogleap. Deerpaw and Eelpaw were nowhere to be seen. Heartstorm lingered behind the two talking cats, unsure whether to cut in.

"Ah, Heartstorm," came Frogleap's voice. "I didn't have time to congratulate you last time. Welcome, Heartstorm to RiverClan as a warrior." Heartstorm beamed and dipped his head respectfully.

"I came to ask about a hunting or border patrol," said Heartstorm to Reedpelt. He nodded.

"There's one tonight," he informed Heartstorm. "A border patrol tonight before sunset. And there will be a hunting patrol soon. Wolfstep is leading it. And the border patrol tonight is being led by Softcry. You can go ask her to join." Heartstorm nodded enthusiastically. He trotted away, heading for the nursery as he had nowhere else to go while waiting for the hunting patrol. He poked his head into the nursery and three little kits mewed. Stripedfur looked up and beamed brightly.

"Heartp- Heartstorm!" she exclaimed. "I'm sorry I didn't get to congratulate you yesterday but the kits were cranky."

"It's ok- thanks," Heartstorm said. Rosekit, Hawkkit and Dustkit ambled to Heartstorm happily.

"Can we go outside with Heartstorm?" mewed Rosekit. Stripedfur shrugged.

"If Heartstorm has time," said Stripedfur gently. "Why don't you ask him." Rosekit turned to Heartstrom and blinked her eyes innocently.

"Can you bring us outside?" asked Rosekit.

"Of course," exclaimed Heartstorm. "My pleasure." The three kits squealed happily and trotted after Heartstrom. He led them to the stream and they splashed into it. They paddled around, showing great skill in swimming already. Only Hawkkit hung back.

"What's wrong?" inquired Heartstorm. He bent down next to Hawkkit who was considerably taller and bigger now. He wondered when Hawkkit would become apprentice.

"I want to swim," said Hawkkit. "But I don't want to do it the wrong way. Moorpelt said once you learn the bad way you can't stop. I know you taught me some before but I don't think I'm good enough yet." Heartstorm almost laughed. Moorpelt seemed to be brining his strict mentor rules to his kits as well as Deerpaw.

"I'll show you again then," said Heartstorm.

"Thanks," said Hawkkit.

"Right, come to the edge," beckoned Heartstorm. Hawkkit moved forward. Heartstorm padded into the water. Rosekit was paddling furiously and water splattered into Heartstorm's face. He laughed and playfully pushed water into Rosekit. She went underwater, flailing and then her head popped out again. She was grinning largely.

"Alright, this is the position," explained Hearstorm. He started swimming slowly down the stream. His feet sometimes brushed against the bottom. Hawkkit followed Heartstorm's movement with his eyes. Frowning deeply, he slowly got into the water and recopied exactly the moves Heartstorm did. Heartstorm was impressed, Hawkkit had almost got it. He was just having trouble to keep his head up. Heartstorm gently pushed Hawkkit up so he could keep his head up properly. Hawkkit smiled gratefully. they paddled down some way until Wolfstep appeared at the stream bank. Rosekit and Dustkit called out for Wolfstep to watch them swim. Wolfstep laughed, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

"Ah, you guys are so good at swimming," he smiled then turned to Heartstorm. "Reedpelt told me you might join the hunting patrol." Heartstorm nodded. "Right, then we're going now. Nice move Dustkit! Wow, Hawkkit you're doing really well." Dustkit was splashing around the water and bumping onto the stream bank. Heartstorm helped Hawkkit out. He had to pull Dustkit out who was still rolling about in the water. Then he had to pull Rosekit out who didn't want to leave.

"I'll be right there!" said Heartstorm. "I need to bring them back to Stripedfur." Wolfstep nodded and walked away. Heartstorm led the kits back to the nursery. Stripedfur smiled.

"Thank you," she beamed at Heartstorm. Heartstorm nodded and gave each kit a friendly little prod before telling them goodbye. He rushed to the camp entrance. Wolfstep, Cloudbreeze and Mudclaw were waiting for him. He quickly joined them and a few moment later, Acornheart joined them as well. They headed out of camp. Cloudbreeze, Mudclaw and Acornheart chatted merrily about their hunting expeditions and Wolfstep trotted at the front. Heartstorm joined his side.

"How're you coping with being a warrior?" inquired Wolfstep.

"Ok, I guess," said Heartstorm. "I mean, I feel kinda lost with all this extra time."

"Get to know some of the warriors," suggested Wolfstep. "Make friends." Heartstorm nodded. He was in good terms with all the cats except Silverdrop. He had never talked to her but was intrigued by her. He didn't know how he was going to become friends with Softcry, Embergaze, Rainfeather and Reedpelt though as they were his best friends parents and it would be too awkward. And he couldn't imagine sharing prey or joking with Moorpelt. He almost laughed at the thought. He could be friends with Sparkbelly though. He was energetic and nice. Finally, the patrol stopped.

"Right, I'm going with Cloudbreeze. Mudclaw, you're with Acornheart and Heartstorm. Go hunt at the river the fish is plenty. Is that ok?" said Wolfstep. All the cats nodded. Wolfstep flicked his tail and he and Cloudbreeze trotted away. Heartstorm turned to Mudclaw and Acornheart.

"To the river then," said Mudclaw. Acornheart and Mudclaw took the lead, chatting about salmon. Heartstorm walked behind them, not really knowing what to do.

"How's it feel being a warrior?" asked Mudclaw suddenly. Heartstorm suddenly snapped out of his thoughts and turned to Mudclaw. Acornheart and Mudclaw were looking at him expectantly.

"Oh um great," said Heartstorm. "I mean, it's kinda weird but ok so far." Acornheart nodded thoughtfully.

"I felt so awkward when I first became warrior," said Acornheart. They reached the river and they crouched at the side.

"Should we do group fishing?" asked Mudclaw.

"I'm better at solo fishing," informed Acornheart.

"Right then, let's spread out. I'll go to that side.

Heartstorm, to the other," said Mudclaw. Heartstorm moved away from Acornheart and stopped a few foxlengths away. He saw Mudclaw do the same. They all crouched and fixed their eyes on the water quietly. Finally, Heartstorm looked up and saw Mudclaw flicking a fish out of the water.

"More salmon coming!" called Mudclaw. Heartstorm nodded and turned his attention back to the water. A fish suddenly appeared. Heartstorm bent forward and flicked the fish out of the water. It flew into the air and started to struggle for breath on the ground. He saw out of the corner of his eye Acornheart catch a fish as well. They fished till they had caught ten fish in total. They all took three fish in their mouth and helped Mudclaw with the last one. They met Mudclaw and Cloudbreeze who each had a mouse and a shrew clasped in their jaws. Heartstorm felt proud as they entered camp, laden with prey. This was his job, as a warrior. To feed his Clan. RiverClan was thriving, just like Thornstar had said. Their prey was plentiful. Heartstorm suddenly remembered the elders and took a salmon to their den. He heard Floodwhisker's voice. Then he heard Pigeaonfeather's. He trotted inside, the two elders were chatting. Pigeonfeather burst into a smile when he saw the salmon Heartstorm had brought.

"Good job in becoming a warrior!" cried Pigeaonfeather. "Is that for us?"

"Yes," nodded Heartstrom. He pushed the salmon forward. Floodwhisker fixed his gaze on Heartstorm and narrowed his eyes.

"Thanks," mumbled Floodwhisker.

"That's so kind!" exclaimed Pigeonfeather enthusiastically. Pigeonfeather was a young and energetic cat who could have been mistaken for an apprentice. Heartstorm watched them for a while.

"Floodwhisker here was telling me about his parents," said Pigeonfeather.

"Yeah," muttered Floodwhisker. Heartstorm then

realised it was almost sunset.

"Sorry I've got to go," he said. He slipped away from the glare of Floodwhisker. He spotted Softcry near the camp entrance, she was resting in the shade with Rainfeather by her side. Heartstorm trotted over to them.

"Hey," smiled Rainfeather.

"Are you joining the border patrol?" asked Softcry pleasantly. Heartstorm nodded.

"Great, we're just waiting for Beestripe and Eelpaw," said Softcry. Heartstorm's ears perked at the mention of Eelpaw. Suddenly, Beestripe emerged from the tunnel and behind him was Eelpaw. Heartstorm grinned and Eelpaw returned the grin when he spotted Heartstorm. They bounded over to each other. Heartstorm couldn't have felt happier to finally see his best friend.

"Hey! Heartstorm! You're going on patrol?" he grinned.

"Yeah!" said Heartstorm. The patrol ducked out of the tunnel and headed for WindClan territory. Eelpaw and Heartstorm stayed behind, talking excitedly about their day. Eelpaw told Heartpaw all about him running up a tree and catching a squirrel.

"Beestripe said I wasn't supposed to climb the tree but he said I was the best climber in the Clan!" said Eelpaw excitedly.

"You better be listening to Beestripe," came a stern voice. It was Softcry. Eelpaw frowned.

"Mum! Softcry!" he exclaimed softly.

"Eelpaw," said Softcry sternly. "Don't go climbing trees if Beestripe doesn't allow it." Beestripe joined their conversation.

"It's alright now. I told him he can climb trees but

not when we're training," said Beestripe. "He might just well be the best climber in the Clan. I might get Silverdrop to teach him to climb some other time. She's also very good." Eelpaw bounced up at the idea.

"Climbing lessons?!" he cried. "That would be awesome!" Beestripe smiled.

"Well, just don't hurt yourself. We can leave the climbing to ThunderClan," said Softcry not very approvingly. Heartstorm and Eelpaw let the other cats walk in front and they returned to their excited chatter.

"It's so awkward doing patrols with Softcry. Beestripe said that it shouldn't be awkward. He says I shouldn't be embarrassed of my parents. I wouldn't be but you saw her, she keeps acting like a mother! I mean, can't she act cool for once," Eelpaw ranted. Heartstorm chuckled.

"Why do you like climbing so much?" asked Heartstorm after a while.

"Well, gripping onto the bark is great and all then when you heave yourself up and then look down, it's like an awesome feeling. Y'know? Like it's really satisfying and cool. To look down at the world from up there, makes me feel on top of the world," grinned Eelpaw. "You should try it sometime."

"I don't think I'm very good at climbing," said Heartstorm. "I definitely wouldn't climb for *fun*." Eelpaw laughed.

"I'm really hyped to have climbing lessons, even if its with Silverdrop," said Eelpaw happily, he lowered his voice. "I've never really talked to her though. To be honest, she scares me. She's weird, y'know? I mean, she should be like an apprentice but she's a warrior."

"Then why do you want to climb trees with her?" asked Heartstorm. He didn't understand the idea of liking to climb trees nor did he see the point of it.

"Well, if Silverdrop likes and is good at climbing, that makes her my friend," grinned Eelpaw.

"Wow," laughed Heartstorm. They reached the WindClan border. Beyond the river stretched the moor. The wind was gentle and the long grass rippled gently. Heartstorm gazed at WindClan, wondering how nice it would be to be running free. But he was happy in RiverClan. He was loyal to RiverClan. Softcry and Rainfeather marked the border. They went on along the border. Night had come and crickets chirped. Everything was calm. There was no sign of WindClan cats.

"Heartstorm, are you going to mark the border?" said Softcry. Heartstorm snapped out of his thoughts and nodded. He remembered he was a warrior now. He padded to the border and marked it. Finally, they made their way back to camp. Another patrol had gone to mark the ThunderClan border. Heartstorm was happy to return to camp for some rest. Although his first day as a warrior had not been as packed with training, he still felt strained. He wasn't sure he was going to get used to being a warrior.

"Goodnight Heartstorm," said Eelpaw. Heartstorm turned to Eelpaw and remembered they weren't in the same den anymore.

"Oh, goodnight," sighed Heartstorm.

"What's wrong?" asked Eelpaw.

"I wish I could be in the apprentice den with you and Deerpaw," said Heartstorm. "I'm don't think I'm ever going to get used to being a warrior."

"Aw, come on Heartstorm," Eelpaw said. "Don't say that!"

"It's true," huffed Heartstorm.

"Hey come on! Deerpaw and I can't wait till we become warriors! You should be happy!" exclaimed Eelpaw.

"Well, I'm not," said Heartstorm. "Being a warrior isn't as great as it's supposed to be." Beestripe approached them.

"Eelpaw, you should go to sleep now," he said. "Tomorrow, we have a lot of training to do. I'll speak to Silverdrop about tree climbing as well." Eelpaw gave an excited squeak, wished Heartstorm goodnight and sped off. Beestripe turned to Heartstorm.

"Don't worry, being a warrior might be a bit scary at first but you'll soon understand what it means to be a warrior and all that time you spend waiting impatiently to become a warrior as an apprentice will be paid off," Beestripe said gently. "Now, you need to rest as well. Although, you are not an apprentice so I cannot tell you what to do." He winked at Heartstorm who felt slightly happier. He followed Beestripe into the warrior's den. Most of the cats were asleep.

"Do you know which nest is yours?" asked Beestripe.

"Yes, Sparkbelly showed me," said Heartstorm.

"Good, then goodnight," Beestripe whispered. Heartstorm padded to his nest, saying goodnight to Beestripe and stepped in. He lay down and curled up into a tight ball. He wrapped his tail on his snout and realised how comfortable his new nest was. It was so soft and warm and comforting. He drifted off into a blissful sleep.

Ch. 18

Heartstorm woke up to the sound of the soft pitter patter of rain. He looked up. Outside, it was raining gently. Heartstorm put his head back down on his paws and listened to the calming sound of the gentle rain. Soon, it was raining harder and harder until it was pouring. Heartstorm finally got up. Only Smallear was in the den. He was snoring gently. Heartstorm padded softly past Smallear and poked his head outside. Cold water hit his snout. He wrinkled his nose and backed back into the den. He shook himself. The air outside was cold and he shivered. It reminded him of leaf-bare once more. Heartstorm debated whether he should go out. He didn't know what he was going to do in the rain and he didn't want to get wet. Suddenly, a cat emerged from the rain and slipped into the den. It was Acornheart, soaked through. She shivered and shook herself. Water splattered everywhere. Smallear jumped up hissing angrily.

"Sorry," muttered Acornheart. "It's pouring."

"I hadn't noticed," answered Smallear coldly.

"Heartstorm! Reedpelt wondered if you wanted to go out hunting. Thornstar doesn't want us to go out alone though. It's hard to see in this weather and the river is starting to overflow so Silverdrop is waiting at the medicine den. You can hunt with her," said Acornheart. Heartstorm nodded. He was glad he had something to do but did not relish the idea of having to go out in the rain. Taking a deep breath, he stepped outside. Rain splattered onto his pelt, soaking right through his fur. He shivered with the sudden cold. He couldn't see very far ahead of himself. He narrowed his eyes, looking down so no water went in his eye and made his way towards the medicine den. Everything was grey and the ground was muddy. Heartstorm's feet sunk into the ground, slowing him down. He saw a dark shape in front of him. It was another cat. He couldn't see who in the rain and made his way towards the medicine den without stopping. He wondered if Deerpaw and Eelpaw were

training in this weather. He finally reached the medicine den and slipped inside, happy for cover. He shook himself gratefully.

"Hey!" snapped an angry voice. "I've got all my herbs here! What do you think you're doing?" Frogleap bustled to Heartstorm's side, muttering angrily.

"Sorry," mumbled Heartstorm, taking a step back, feeling slightly guilty. He spotted another cat in the corner of the den. Silverdrop. He studied her. She was calm and she seemed not to have noticed his arrival. Suddenly, she got up and flicked her tail.

"Let's go," she said. Heartstorm frowned but followed her as she marched out of the medicine den and into the rain without hesitation. Heartstorm barred his teeth as rain started to pelt down on him once more. He trotted to keep up with Silverdrop. They crawled under the tunnel and out of RiverClan with difficulty. Silverdrop led Heartstorm in the shelter of a bush. The rain didn't fall onto them as directly.

"Where should we go to hunt?" asked Silverdrop. "It's going to be hard to smell and see prey in this weather and communicate together."

"How about the river?" suggested Heartstorm. The fish would certainly be plenty if there was a flood.

"There won't be many fish if the river is overflowing and rushing quickly," said Silverdrop. Heartstorm looked down at her retort. "The trees." Heartstorm frowned.

"The trees?" he said.

"Yes, we can hunt in the trees," said Silverdrop.

"I don't.. climb," said Heartstorm. This was the first time he had talked to Silverdrop and he already didn't like her.

"You're a cat, of course you climb," said Silverdrop.

"I d- I can- I don't climb!" cried Heartstorm in exasperation. Suddenly, a cat crashed into the bush and fell

between Heartstorm and Silverdrop. They both jumped back. Eelpaw looked up at them with a lopsided grin.

"Hey there Heartstorm," he grinned. Heartstorm laughed. Eelpaw rolled back to his feet and shook himself. Water sprayed everywhere. Silverdrop hissed.

"Oh, hi," said Eelpaw, turning to Silverdrop, only now noticing her. She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Ugh," she said.

"It's water," pointed out Eelpaw. "Chill."

"Come on Heartstorm, let's go hunt," said Silverdrop. Heartstorm didn't move.

"Eelpaw, do you want to come?" asked Heartstorm. Silverdrop dropped her mouth at Heartstorm.

"Um, what do you think you're doing?" she muttered. Heartstorm shrugged. He knew Eelpaw loved climbing.

"Sure, where you going?" he said happily.

"We're hunting in the trees," said Silverdrop almost in a growl.

"Climbing?" gasped Eelpaw, he sprung to his feet eagerly. "Of course I'd like to come! I love climbing."

"Shouldn't you be with your mentor?" questioned Silverdrop sourly.

"You should be!" retorted Eelpaw. "You're like ten moons or something."

"Twelve," growled Silverdrop.

"Yeah whatever, my training is finished for today. So I'll come with you guys," said Eelpaw.

"It's dangerous," said Silverdrop.

"He's really good at climbing," said Heartstorm. "Please?" Then he realised he was a warrior. "I mean, he's coming. He wants to help. Come on, let's go." Heartstorm pushed out of the bush and marched away. He hoped Eelpaw and Silverdrop were following or he would be making a fool of himself. To his relief, Eelpaw trotted to his side.

"Thanks!" Eelpaw exclaimed.

"No problem," said Heartstorm then into Eelpaw's ear. "Is she following?" Eelpaw pretended to be looking around casually.

"Yep!" reported Eelpaw excitedly. Heartstorm couldn't help but smile. Being a warrior wasn't so bad after all. Silverdrop caught up with them.

"So are we going to stop walking and climb already?" she accused. Heartstorm stopped in his tracks and nodded. Eelpaw trotted to the foot of a tree eagerly and unsheathed his claws. He leapt up and clung onto the bark, quickly and swiftly, almost effortlessly, Eelpaw climbed to the first branch. He then leapt up higher and higher, hauling himself onto a few of the higher branches. Heartstorm watched in awe, although looking up let more rain fall into his eyes. He looked back down and blinked. Silverdrop went next, she climbed almost as swiftly as Eelpaw. Heartstorm knew he had to go now. He cringed. He didn't like climbing. He didn't know how to climb. With a sigh, he leapt up and unsheathed his claws. He thudded onto the tree bark. He sunk his claws in and held on as tight as he could. He sucked his breath in and slowly inched forward. His claws felt as if they were going to snap of and his legs were burning as his muscles worked to hold on. Finally, he found the first branch. He gratefully hauled himself up and sprawled on the branch, shivering and panting. He let out deep breaths and looked for Silverdrop or Eelpaw. He narrowed his eyes up and to his dismay, they were almost at the top. With an inner groan, Heartstorm started to make his way up. By the time he reached the top, his whole body was burning and aching and his claws felt detached to his paws. He had finally reached one of the

highest branches where Silverdrop and Eelpaw were waiting. Eelpaw yawned when he saw Heartstorm and Silverdrop rolled her eyes. She was lucky no rain fell into her big eyes. Heartstorm almost sniggered.

"Finally," huffed Silverdrop. She then leapt off the tree. Heartstorm's eyes went wide, which was a mistake. A drop of rain fell into his open eye and he stumbled back. He blinked and growled angrily. Eelpaw burst out in laughter. Heartstorm looked around. Silverdrop was nowhere to be seen.

"Where did she go?" cried Heartstorm.

"Look carefully," said Eelpaw. "She's on the other tree. Look, there's that big branch overthrere. I'm going next." Heartstorm's heart lurched and his jaw dropped. His eyes almost went wide open but he made sure they were narrowed as small as possible.

"I'm not jumping to another tree!" groaned Heartstorm. This was the worst idea he had ever had.

"It's not that far!" said Eelpaw. "Come on, if I can do it, you can do it."

"I seriously regret my life choices," muttered Heartstorm. Eelpaw crouched and leapt. He fell into what Heartstorm saw as nothingness.

"It's easy!" came Eelpaw's voice. Heartstorm started to roll his eyes but thought better of it. It wasn't easy. Heartstorm crouched and looked hard for the branch. He saw it through the rain, it was big but looked extremely far. Heartstorm thought about climbing back down but finally, he jumped. He was in the air. Rain was flying everywhere. Wind rushed past him. Heartstorm's heart almost stopped. Heartstorm's mind went berserk. he was about to die. Suddenly, his front paws and chest thumped onto something hard and the wind was knocked out of him. He felt his hind legs flailing on nothingness. Suddenly, teeth sunk into his fur and paws clung onto him. He was pulled up and he lay sprawled on a large branch. Eelpaw and Silverdrop looked down at him.

"Wh-I.. ugh...," stammered Heartstorm. His heard was racing in his chest and he couldn't wrap his mind on what had happened.

"You are really bad at calculating your jumps," muttered Silverdrop. Heartstorm didn't have the energy to reply. "You know what, why don't you stay here? I'll go hunt with ." Eelpaw grinned.

"See you later Heartstorm. Rest well," he winked. Heartstorm closed his eyes. He was soaked to the bone and he had almost died.

"I almost died," murmured Heartstorm disbelievingly.

"You weren't," snorted Silverdrop. "I was there to help." With that, Eelpaw and Silverdrop left. Heartstorm was grateful he didn't have to do anymore climbing then he realised he still needed to get down and he let out an angry moan. Rain trickled down his throat and he gagged. Ugh. He closed his eyes and shuffled nearer to the shelter of leaves. ShadowClan officially wasn't the thing he hated most. He'd put climbing at the top of his list. Then rain. Then ShadowClan and Silverdrop.

Ch. 19

When Heartstorm finally made it down the tree, he was shaking with tiredness and cold. He limped after Silverdrop towards camp. Eelpaw trotted at his side, chattering excitedly about their catches. They had caught a wet squirrel, its babies and a stupid bird. They finally made it to camp and the rain had lessened. A few cats were walking around camp but they were all headed somewhere, not just chilling around. Silverdrop and Eelpaw brought their prey to the fresh-kill pile which was in the shelter of a bush and a cat had put a few more leaves to keep it dry although it wasn't much use as the prey was already soaked when Silverdrop and Eelpaw dropped it in. Thornstar approached them.

"Good job!" he congratulated. "Good catch. Especially in this weather. Thanks Silverdrop, Heartstorm and you too Eelpaw."

"I didn't do anything," assured Heartstorm.

"He just lay dead on a branch," agreed Silverdrop unhelpfully. Thornstar smiled. Heartstorm muttered under his breath and padded away with Eelpaw. Eelpaw was trotting by his side happily. They slipped into the apprentice den. Deerpaw was lounging in her nest. She leapt to her feet with a broad smile.

"Hey!" she cried bounding up to Heartstorm.

"Hey," replied Heartstorm with a grin. He was glad to see Deerpaw.

"What did you guys do today?" asked Deerpaw. "how's life as a warrior? Done anything cool yet?"

"He got stuck up a tree!" exclaimed Eelpaw.

"NO?" gasped Deerpaw with a smile. Heartstorm rolled his eyes.

"I didn't get stuck," he mumbled. But Eelpaw was telling an exaggerated story about how he had saved Heartstorm. Of course, Heartstorm didn't really mind, he was just slightly amused.

"Aw, poor Heartstorm," said Deerpaw, prodding Heartstorm amiably. "So how is Silverdrop?"

"She's so good at climbing!" cried Eelpaw. "I wish she could teach me but she's like so rude and annoying and bossy! Did I mention how bossy she was?"

"Like two hundred times," mumbled Heartstorm.

"What did you do today?" asked Eelpaw with a yawn. He padded to his nest and Heartstorm ached to be back in the apprentice den with his friends.

"Nothing much," shrugged Deerpaw. "Moorpelt doesn't like rain so he just sent me on a border patrol then gave me the day off."

"Lucky!" exclaimed Eelpaw. "But I had fun."

"I'm going to sleep now," said Deerpaw. "I think Moorpelt will wake me up extra early tomorrow to compensate for the lack of training today." Eelpaw nodded. He grinned at Heartstorm.

"Wanna go climbing again tomorrow?" he teased. Heartstorm shook his head.

"You can go with Silverdrop. I'm never climbing a tree again," huffed Heartstorm. He was slightly sad he had to leave his best friends to chatter a bit more to go back to the warrior's den. He knew that even though they said they were going to sleep now, they wouldn't be able to help the urge to talk a bit more together. Heartstorm knew, he used to do it with them. But now.., now they didn't even seem to notice him gone. Heartstorm slipped outside. There was a light drizzle and Heartstorm puffed out his fur and stalked to the warrior's den. Moorpelt and Beestripe were in a corner, talking. Heartstorm slumped into his nest and closed his

eyes. He wrapped his tail around his snout and tried to think of something good. He just wasn't feeling in a good mood. He hadn't had the best day and he just felt grumpy. Suddenly, he felt a warm breath on his ear. He looked up. He stared up into Silverdrop's grey and pearly eyes. They were beautiful. Heartstorm broke her gaze.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Do you want me to teach you how to climb?" asked Silverdrop. The question was so out of the blue, Heartstorm didn't say anything. He didn't like or hate Silverdrop. He didn't think he'd ever have to talk to her again after today. But that was stupid, they were in the same Clan for StarClan's sake!

"Um, I think you should go ask Eelpaw," Heartstorm said finally.

"You need the help more," she said firmly. "Tomorrow at noon." Heartstorm frowned and watched her pad away. Just when Silverdrop turned around, Sparkbelly appeared at his side and lowered his voice to Heartstorm.

"What did she say?" he whispered.

"Nothing," shrugged Heartstorm. Sparkbelly gazed at Silverdrop a little longer in a longing sort of way. "Right, alright, goodnight." Sparkbelly sighed and dragged himself back to his nest, staring at Silverdrop with clouded eyes. Heartstorm gave an amused snort and settled down for his second night in the warrior's den.

Ch. 20

Heartstorm sprang. He felt his claws dig into the mouse and felt it squirm. He quickly snapped its neck and sat down. He gobbled down the mouse, feeling extremely hungry after a morning of hunting. He finished his mouse quickly then trotted to the tree where he had buried the rest of his prey. He pulled out another mouse, a pigeon and a shrew. He took them in his mouth and padded back to camp. The air was fresh and warm. The sun shone brightly but not too hotly. The sky was a beautiful blue with a few white puffy clouds. This was Heartstorm's weather. He ducked into camp and dropped his catch into the fresh-kill pile. Thornstar padded to him. His eyes were sparkling with something Heartstorm couldn't pin down.

"Good job," said Thornstar with a small dip of the head. "Heartstorm, I needed to talk to you." Heartstorm frowned, raking his brain for something he had done wrong. He couldn't find anything. Except... Did Thornstar think he wasn't good enough to be a warrior? Maybe Thornstar realised he wasn't ready. Heartstorm gulped.

"Heartstorm," said Thornstar gently, seeing the look on his face. "It is nothing bad, I assure you." Heartstorm wasn't very assured.

"Oh right, thanks. What is it?" asked Heartstorm.

"Please come with me to my den," beckoned Thornstar. Heartstorm followed Thornstar, worry clouding his mind. He didn't notice the beautiful weather or the chirping birds anymore. Thornstar disappeared into his den. Heartstorm walked forward and pushed past the long strands of ivy hanging down. He entered a dim den. The ground was cold stone and Heartstorm couldn't help but shiver. He looked around. The walls were tall and smooth. On one side was a large nest and on the other was a small pool of clear water. Heartstorm was busy looking around he didn't notice the other cats in the den. He finally focused on them and quickly sat

beside them. Applenose, a messy furred brown cat, Sparkbelly and Wolfstep were sitting in front of Thornstar, Reedpelt and Frogleap. Reedpelt smiled kindly at Heartstorm who gave back a feeble smile.

"I have asked you here today," said Thornstar. "To talk about the three kits. Rosekit, Hawkkit and Dustkit." Heartstorm listened carefully, feeling more curious. He mustn't have done something bad if Sparkbelly, Applenose and Wolfstep were there. He glanced at Sparkbelly who gave him an excited smile.

"In two moons they will be ready to be made apprentices in two moons," continued Reedpelt. Heartstorm felt his stomach squirmed and finally understood.

"And we think you four are ready to take on apprentices," finished Thornstar. Heartstorm's stomach made a happy turn. Sparkbelly shot Heartstorm a grin and Heartstorm grinned back happily.

"But there are only three kits," pointed out Applenose. He was the more serious one. Heartstorm thought him a bit like Moorpelt.

"Yes, we just want to talk to you a bit to see if you are ready and we will chose three of you to become mentors," nodded Thornstar. Wolfstep turned to Heartstorm who was now nervous once more.

"Don't worry," he whispered soothingly. "You would be a great mentor." Heartstorm wasn't sure but was grateful nonetheless for the encouragement. He liked Wolfstep, he was kind and strong and loyal and wise. Heartstorm admired him now for his calm composure. He would be one of the mentors for sure. Applenose was eyeing Heartstorm and Sparkbelly now, looking suspicious. Heartstorm hung his head. He was the youngest of them all. He had barely been a warrior for half a moon and he still didn't really know his place as a warrior in RiverClan. It felt weird to be able to make his own decisions of what to do for the day.

"Now, Applenose, which kit do you think you'd like to

teach?" asked Thornstar.

"Rosekit," replied Applenose instantly. Everybody knew she was the strongest, bravest and most outgoing than all the kits for now. Heartstorm resented Applenose slightly for choosing her just because she was bigger and stronger than the other kits.

"Sparkbelly?" asked Reedpelt. Sparkbelly frowned.

"Dustkit," he replied. Dustkit was more quiet and followed Rosekit but he liked playing jokes on other cats. Heartstorm thought he and Sparkbelly would definitely match.

"Heartstorm?" asked Thornstar. Heartstorm snapped out of his thoughts.

"Oh um..., Hawkkit," he answered. He liked Hawkkit. He was not the strongest of the kits but he liked his personality and found him quite cute.

"Yes and Wolfstep?" asked Thornstar. Wolfstep thought for a while, his brow furrowed.

"Hawkkit," he nodded. Heartstorm felt his heart drop. Wolfstep would surely get him. Wolfstep gave Heartstorm an apologetic look.

"But I wouldn't mind any kit. They are all as able as the next," added Wolfstep. Thornstar nodded.

"Well, Heartstorm how are you fitting in your role as a warrior?" he asked.

"It's been alright... I felt a bit lost but I'm getting used to it," replied Heartstorm unsurely.

"I think we need time to discuss," came a voice. Heartstorm looked to the side of the den and spotted Frogleapt standing up. He hadn't talked till now. "You'll know in two moons." Heartstorm and the three other warriors nodded and walked out. Heartstorm blinked in the sudden sunlight and felt more refreshed and happier. They sky was clear and everything woul be alright. A

gentle breeze blew on Heartpaw, making him take a deep relaxing breath.

"Don't worry, Heartstorm," said Wolfstep. "If they think you're to be a good mentor then you will be mentor to Hawkkit, not me. I don't think I'm more able than you." Heartstorm stared at him for a moment.

"Er, thanks," he said. Wolfstep nodded and padded away. Sparkbelly joined his side, grinning happily.

"Do you think you're going to be made mentor to Hawkkit?" asked Sparkbelly. "He doesn't really talk much... Oh well. I really hope I get Dustkit. He's got plenty of jokes. Applenose's a bit grumpy, don't you think?" Heartstorm shrugged.

"Anyways, I've got to go," said Sparkbelly. "See you!" Heartstorm watched as Sparkbelly bounded away towards Acornheart and Moorpelt. Heartstorm sighed. He looked around for Deerpaw or Eelpaw. He was excited at the prospect of being a mentor but he would only know in two moons and he was sure Wolfstep would be chosen. Not seeing any sign of Deerpaw or Eelpaw, Heartstorm slipped under the tunnel and out of camp for a stroll. He needed time to think. A breeze blew gently, refreshing Heartstorm and he felt his worried blow away. If Wolfstep became Hawkkit's mentor, he would be worthy. Heartstorm still had plenty of time to become mentor. Suddenly, a silver cat stopped in front of Heartstorm. Silverdrop. Heartstorm felt himself groan inwardly.

"Ready for your climbing lesson?" she asked seriously.

Ch. 21

"No," said Heartstorm firmly.

"Come on," said Silverdrop in exasperation.

"I don't want to!" protested Heartstorm. Go find Eelpaw or something."

"You need me more," said Silverdrop. Heartstorm didn't reply. He felt as if her words meant more than just that.

"Fine," said Silverdrop finally. "Don't learn how to climb. Be the only cat who doesn't know how to climb. Heartstorm, the cat who's scared of heights." Heartstorm grimaced.

"I'm not scared," huffed Heartstorm.

"Mhmm," tutted Silverdrop. Heartstorm turned away and marched off. He heard Silverdrop behind him.

"What is it?" he asked gruffly.

"Come on, we can start on a small tree," said Silverdrop more kindly. Heartstorm stopped and turned to face her. He gazed into her eyes. They were beautiful swirls of grey-blue. She broke his glance.

"Then at least meet me on the hill at sundown," whispered Silverdrop finally and turned away. Heartstorm watched her slip away, confused. See her at sundown? On the hill? He sighed and turned back to camp. He needed some time to think and maybe talk to Deerpaw or Eelpaw. Unfortunately, they were not in camp and by the time the sky was turning beautiful shades of purple and pink, Heartstorm had to make the decision. Would he meet Silverdrop or not? He poked his head out of the warrior's den and scanned the clearing, Silverdrop was nowhere to be seen. In the

warrior's den, only Applenose, Smallear, Wolfstep, Mudclaw and Sparkbelly were resting. Heartstorm finally sighed and heaved himself out of the warrior's den. He trotted to the apprentice den and poked his head in. Deerpaw and Eelpaw were not in. He sighed and headed for the elder's den. He heard Floodwhisker complaining about something and quickly veered away. He headed for the nursery. He could hear Stripedfur, talking to her kits and Rosekit complaining and being backed up by Dustkit. Heartstorm swivelled around, still keeping an eye out for Silverdrop and finally made up his mind.

The air was cool and a gentle cool breeze blew. The sky was glittering with bright stars. Heartstorm sunk his paws into the soft dirt and looked around. The short blades of grass were swaying gently in the breeze. Heartstorm took in the sweet smells. Taking a deep breath, he walked up the hill. He reached the top and a powerful breeze ruffled his fur. At the top of the grassy hill, he could see the sky without any trees blocking him. Silverpelt was endless. The moon winked back at Heartstorm and Heartstorm felt shivers down his spine. A cool wind blew on the top of the hill and Heartstorm felt strangely cool and calm. Owls hooted and crickets chirped. He had never thought the night life could be this beautiful. He sighed.

"You came," interrupted a voice. Heartstorm turned around, slightly annoyed at the cat who had interrupted his calm trance. Silverdrop's pelt was lit up by the moon and the bright stars. Her eyes reflected Silverpelt.

"Oh, you're here," said Heartstorm. He frowned at his words. Silverdrop nodded.

"I am," she said dreamily.

"Sorry for being late," said Heartstorm. He had seriously thought of not going but finally, he had gone. He hadn't counted on Silverdrop being there though, now he felt slightly lost.

"It's alright," replied Silverdrop, sitting beside Heartstorm. They gazed at the night sky together. Heartstorm frowned, Silverdrop had been late too, but she made no other comment.

"So, what did you want to tell me?" asked Heartstorm.

"Tell you?" repeated Silverdrop. "Oh, nothing." Heartstorm raised his eyebrows.

"Then why did you ask me to come here?" he asked, slightly annoyed and impatient. A small cricket leapt up at him and he batted it away, bristling.

"To see the view," said Silverdrop. "I thought it would be obvious."

"Obvious? It wasn't obvious," grunted Heartstorm. He was getting frustrated at Silverdrop, she was so dreamy and ugh!

"I'm leaving," snapped Heartstorm. "You asked me to come here to "look at the view". You talk all riddle like and mysterious. You act as if you're the boss or something. But you're not. Thornstar is. You're- you're... you're *you*., NOTHING." Heartstorm stormed down the hill. He didn't know where the rush of anger had come from. As he marched back into the forest, guilt flooded through him. Suddenly, Silverdrop ran to his side. Her eyes were ablaze with fury.

"You don't know anything!" she hissed angrily, lashing her tail. "You don't know me. How dare you accuse me?"

"Well then, if I don't know you then stop talking to me!" shouted Heartstorm. "You never talked to me before. Why are you talking to me now?!"

"Because, because..., I want to talk to you" she said more calmly.

"There you go, talking nonsense again!" accused Heartstorm, he swivelled around and growled.

"Come back, I'll talk to you. I'll explain," she said. It was clear she was trying not to claw him. Her claws were unsheathed and as Heartstorm turned back to her, her eyes were murderous and angry. He felt slightly scared. He didn't want to mess with her. He followed her reluctantly back to the hill. She

took a deep rasping breath, clearly trying to calm down. Finally, she turned to Heartstorm and sheathed her claws.

"He's coming for you" whispered Silverdrop, her voice was shaky. Heartstorm had never seen her like this. She looked scared and fragile. Silverdrop's voice caught in her throat. She was shaking violently and she seemed about to pass out.

"Um, look I'm sorry for what I said before," said Heartstorm awkwardly. "Why are you telling me this? I mean, you don't need to tell me this if you aren't... ready." Silverdrop shook her head.

"I need to tell you," she said, calming her breaths.

"Right," murmured Heartstorm.

"He's going to come for you...," started Silverdrop. "He won't stop till he kills you."

"Who?" asked Heartstorm pointedly.

"I thought you would know," said Silverdrop.

"Obviously not," muttered Heartstorm.

"Blizzardkit," said Silverdrop.

"Blizzardkit..., is a kit," pointed out Heartstorm.

"Stormpelt... Goldenheart. Birdkit..," said Silverdrop.

"How do you know them?" asked Heartstorm. "You weren't at the Gathering."

"I was not," agreed Silverdrop.

"Then how do you know?" questioned Heartstorm. "How do you know them?"

"I have dreams," whispered Silverdrop. "I had a dream of Goldenheart, telling Blizzardkit..., telling Blizzardkit to get

revenge. That you caused Stormpelt's death."

"But I didn't...," whispered Heartstorm hoarsely.

"I saw it. He was just born. Hadn't even opened his eyes yet. Goldenheart whispered in his ear ... "You will get revenge on Heartpaw"... I heard it. Her voice was so- so angry. Tinged with hatred," croaked Silverdrop. Her throat was dry. "And he opened his eyes and looked right at me! They were blazing. Blazing with anger, thirst for revenge. Hatred." Heartstorm felt a trickle of fear run down his spine. But he shouldn't be scared, he told himself. There was nothing to be scared of. Blizzardkit was, after all, just a kit.

"How did you see this?" asked Heartstorm once more.

"I dream about it everyday. Sometimes, I see him. As a warrior. Fighting with you. It's horrible," whispered Silverdrop with a shiver. Without thinking about it, Heartstorm inched closer to her so they could keep warm. The air seemed colder somehow.

"T-there's b-blood," stammered Silverdrop. Heartstorm had never seen her so scared like this. "And he's just so filled with hate."

"it's just dreams," assured Heartstorm softly. His mind was whirring.

"but it's not," whispered Silverdrop. "It's so real."

"Why don't you tell Thornstar?" asked Heartstorm.

"I can't," said Silverdrop, shaking her head.

"Why not?" asked Heartstorm with a frown.

"I can't...," repeated Silverdrop softly.

"Don't be scared," murmured Heartstorm. "Blizzardkit is only a kit. I'm a warrior. You're a warrior. And Birdkit is just a kit as well, and as for Goldenheart, she's just a pain in the butt."

"You don't understand, these dreams.., they haunt me," said Silverdrop. "Everynight. I see you dying in a different way. And when you die, I-I see Stormpelt... he comes up behind Blizzardkit. And he tells him he's proud of his son. His only son."

"I am not Stormpelt's son," muttered Heartstorm. "Look, you should tell Frogleap."

"I can't," said Silverdrop.

"Why not?" asked Heartstorm once more.

"I just..., I'm scared. I told Frogleap about a dream I had once. He told Thornstar. They said I should become a medicine cat. They said if I had any more dreams I should become a medicine cat. I want to be a warrior."

"Why? Why do you need to become a medicine cat?"

"They think my dreams will affect me in battle..."

"Oh."

"Yeah.... well, I just thought I'd tell you. So you'd be ..- prepared. Just in case."

"Yeah erm, thanks. In your dreams, how did they look? Stormpelt and Blizzardkit, I mean."

"Blizzardkit was grown up and strong. He had pure white fur and a dark grey sort of line of grey on his side. His eyes were stormy. Stormpelt just seemed..., old."

"Right, thanks."

"I might be wrong though. These things might not even happen. Ever."

"They sound realistic."

"They certainly feel realistic." Silverdrop

shuddered.

"I'll be on my guard."

"I guess we should go back now." Heartstorm nodded in agreement and they padded back towards camp. Both of their minds were away, thinking about what had just happened. Heartstorm felt a shiver as he thought about Stormpelt. Stormpelt..., his father. No, he wasn't his father anymore. Stormpelt was nothing. But he had raised Heartstorm and Heartstorm still felt a certain attachment to his father.

"I have dreams sometimes as well," whispered Heartstorm as they reached the camp entrance. "Of Brightheart. Once, I had a dream about Stormpelt as well... He disowned me."

"Are you mad?" asked Silverdrop. "That he did that?"

"No, just... sad and... betrayed," sighed Heartstorm.

"I understand," replied Silverdrop, gazing into Heartstorm's eyes. Her gaze was soft and warm, it made Heartstorm's heart beat faster. Made his breathing heavier. Together they slipped back into camp.

Ch. 22

Heartstorm thought about telling Deerpaw and Eelpaw about the talk he had had the day before with Silverdrop but for some reason he found he wanted to keep it between them.

"What's wrong?" asked Deerpaw, prodding Heartstorm.

"What? oh nothing," said Heartstorm.

"We're becoming warriors in like a moon!" exclaimed Eelpaw happily.

"Moorpelt said if I keep it up I might not even need to do the final assessment," Deerpaw bragged proudly.

"That's great!" exclaimed Heartstorm happily. They were under the shade of a few trees near the stream. Heartstorm was going on a border patrol later and Eelpaw and Deerpaw were off for the morning.

"How's it being a warrior?" asked Eelpaw.

"Great," said Heartstorm and he meant it.

"Aren't you like, lonely?" asked Deerpaw. "I mean, we don't see each other often."

"I have other friends!" protested Heartstorm. Eelpaw raised his eyebrows with a small grin.

"What? With Softcry or Rainfeather?" he said.

"That would be weird," agreed Heartstorm said. The three best friends burst into laughter.

"So, who are your friends?" asked Eelpaw.

"Sparkbelly," said Heartstorm, raking his brain for

more cats. Wolfstep was nice but he didn't think he'd consider him as a friend.

"Sparkbelly?" cried Deerpaw with a small smile. Eelpaw and Deerpaw burst into a fit of giggles.

"Ugh, what is it now?" asked Heartstorm irritably but he grinned.

"Sparkbelly is like.. dumb," Eelpaw softened his voice.

"Just like you!" snorted Deerpaw.

"I'm not dumb!" cried Eelpaw indignantly.

"So who else are you friends with?" asked Deerpaw.

"Er...," Heartstorm thought. "Silverdrop." Eelpaw and Deerpaw stared at him with wide eyes. Then Eelpaw shrugged.

"She's pretty, I guess," he said.

"You in love with her?" asked Deerpaw, chuckling.

"No!" cried Heartstorm.

"Are you sure?" taunted Eelpaw. "Heartstorm is in love. Heartstorm is in love."

"You've got a crush on her!" cried Deerpaw with a grin as Heartstorm looked down and licked his chest fur in embarrassment. He didn't know how he felt about Silverdrop but something about what Eelpaw and Deerpaw were saying struck him. Maybe he might like her a bit.

"Eelpaw?" called a voice. Eelpaw pricked his ears and looked about.

"Yeah Beestripe?" he answered. They waited for an answer.

"Time to go," came Beestripe's reply. Eelpaw sighed and muttered goodbye to Deerpaw and Heartstorm.

"I guess you need to go too," sighed Heartstorm. Deerpaw shook her head.

"I still have time," she said. "Tell me all about Silverdrop!" Heartstorm cringed.

"There's nothing to tell!" he wailed.

"Of course there is!" said Deerpaw. "Come on, spill the beans."

"What beans?" came a small voice. Deerpaw and Heartstorm turned to see Rosekit padding towards them. She was much taller now and leaner.

"Heartstorm is-" Deerpaw said.

"Shut up!" hissed Heartstorm. Rosekit's smile widened.

"What is it?" she cried. "Is it a secret?"

"What secret?" came another voice. Dustkit slipped into sight. His pelt was dirty and littered with bits of dirt.

"It's their secret," came another voice. It was Stripedfur. She padded into view with Hawkkit behind her. His eyes swept the place and landed on Heartstorm. He smiled happily. Heartstorm returned the smile.

"We want to know the secret!" said Dustkit.

"It's a secret, they don't need to tell it to you," said Stripedfur strictly.

"It's quite alright," said Deerpaw lightly. "I'm sure Heartstorm won't mind." Heartstorm eyed Deerpaw angrily.

"Don't," he warned under his breath. Stripedfur frowned and dragged her kits away, which was harder now that they were older and only Hawkkit listened.

"Rosekit! Dustkit! If you don't come with me now I'll tell Thornstar to make you apprentices when you're twelve moons old!" warned Stripedfur. Rosekit and Dustkit quickly after their mother, protesting.

"You really thought I was going to tell them," exclaimed Deerpaw and she burst into a fit of giggles. "You should have seen your face! You were so scared!"

"I was not!" Heartstorm said glumly.

"Deerpaw!" came Moorpelt's strict voice. Deerpaw huffed.

"I've got to go," she sighed then grinned once more. "You're so gullible." She winked at him and trotted off. Heartstorm sighed and headed for the camp entrance. Smoketail, Smallear and Cloudbreeze were waiting for him. He joined them and they set off. Heartstorm's thoughts were occupied on Silverdrop but soon he just thought about Hawkkit and being his mentor. He felt his stomach squirm at the thought of not getting an apprentice.

"There's a Gathering tonight," said Smallear.

"I reckon I'll be going this time," said Cloudbreeze. "I haven't gone for a while."

"You're surely going, Heartstorm," said Smoketail, nodding to Heartstorm. Heartstorm snapped out of his thoughts.

"Yeah, Thornstar is bound to announce you became a warrior," agreed Smallear.

"How've you been fitting in?" asked Cloudbreeze. "Weird innit?"

"Yeah, a bit. I mean, I wasn't used to you know, making my own decisions," said Heartstorm.

"Hey, look," said Smallear, nodding towards the other side of the river. "We've got company." Heartstorm narrowed his eyes and spotted a few ThunderClan cats advancing. They hissed as they came nearer to the river bank. Heartstorm felt his own fur rising.

"Hey be calm, alright?" Smoketail said under his breath. The strong scent of ThunderClan wafted to Heartstorm's nose. He wrinkled his nose and growled.

"Well well well, if it isn't Smallear and ooh," grinned a large warrior. "Heartpaw!"

"Heartstorm!" snapped Heartstorm. "My name is Heartstorm."

"Oh so you've been promoted have you?" taunted another cat.

"We're not disturbing you," growled Smoketail. "So get on to your own business."

"Oh are our harsh words disturbing you?" said another red warrior.

"Shut up," snapped Cloudbreeze.

"Little RiverClan is scared!" grinned the first cat. Heartstorm growled and crouched. He lashed his tail angrily. "Oooh and little Heart*storm* is getting angry!" The other two ThunderClan cats barked in laughter.

"Get away from the river," snarled Smallear.

"But this river isn't yours! Is it? The last time I checked we're till on our side," said the second cat who was a light tabby.

"Smoketail, can I go to the other side and rip their pelts off?" growled Smallear under his breath. Heartstorm nodded in agreement. He felt anger surge through him.

"Smallear, this is what they're trying to do, provoke you. Just stay calm," said Smoketail but it was clear he was fighting back the urge to throw himself on the ThunderClan warriors as well.

"We've been wanting to have the river to ourselves for some time though," said the biggest cat thoughtfully. "Maybe we should see who earns it?" He grinned toothily. Smallear lashed his tail and Smoketail growled.

"Mark the borders," he said under his breath. "Then we'll go." Smallear and Heartstorm let out a puff of disappointment but marker the border with Cloudbreeze. Smoketail glared at the ThunderClan cats once more then swivelled around and padded away, keeping his breath controlled. Heartstorm slunk after him, shaking with anger. Smallear was more reluctant but Cloudbreeze edged him on and they moved away.

"Aww scaredy cats are going going to go cry to Thornstar!" jeered the red cat. Heartstorm's ear burned with anger. He wanted to turn around and leap at them but he kept his head down and ignored them.

"Running away from us, are you? Fleapelts. Fleapelts Fleapelts," taunted the largest cat.

"Ha, I always knew RiverClan were cowards," laughed the light tabby cat. Heartstorm turned around but Cloudbreeze blocked him.

"Don't," he said. Heartstorm barred his teeth but turned around once more. They finally reached camp, still burning with anger and Smoketail headed straight for Thornstar. Heartstorm sighed and made his way back to the warrior's den. His muscles felt heavy and he felt sleepy. Perhaps because he had had so little sleep last night. He looked around for Silverdrop but she was nowhere to be seen. He curled up into a ball and closed his

eyes to think. He suddenly wished he could talk to Silverdrop.

Ch. 23

"Heartstorm, Embergaze, Beestripe, Eelpaw, Cloudbreeze, Greyspeck and Applenose," announced Thornstar. "Will be going to the Gathering tonight." Heartstorm grinned. He joined Deerpaw and Eelpaw who were talking excitedly. Deerpaw was slightly disappointed but she didn't show it.

"We are leaving now," said Greyspeck, trotting to Heartstorm and Eelpaw's side. Heartstorm and Eelpaw said goodbye to Deerpaw and trotted to the camp entrance. Heartstorm knew Thornstar might mention him in the Gathering and was shivering with excitement. He passed Silverdrop as he walked out and stopped to look at her. She broke his gaze and slipped away. He frowned. Was she mad at him?

"Reckon Thornstar's going to mention you?" inquired Eelpaw.

"Hopefully," said Heartstorm distractedly. Where had Silverdrop gone? Why had she turned away?

"Heartstorm... Heartstorm," Eelpaw prodded.

"Wha?" He snorted.

"What happened with ThunderClan today?" asked Eelpaw.

"They were insulting us," said Heartstorm, remembering his anger from earlier.

"Come on, don't be so slow," hurried Beestripe. Heartstorm slipped in and out of the shadows cast by the moon. Finally, they crossed the river and soon spotted the Four Trees in the distance. Heartstorm grinned. As they entered the clearing, he spotted WindClan. He spotted Ivypaw next to Firecry and expected to feel jealousy or anger but he felt nothing. He couldn't care less

for Ivypaw. He pressed closer to Eelpaw and eyed WindClan accusingly. He caught Ivypaw's eye and she held his gaze. Finally, she broke away and turned back to talk to Firecry. ShadowClan and ThunderClan weren't there yet. The two Clans Heartstorm hated the most. Suddenly he smelt them. ShadowClan. Their strong scent was so different. He had never thought ShadowClan had smelt so... dark and stinky before. He crinkled his nose. ShadowClan warriors piled into the clearing, they kept to themselves. He felt their eyes on him. Their stares cold and unkind. He didn't care. He was RiverClan. No other Clan mattered. Only his Clan. Plus he was used to it. He spotted Cinderstar, her eyes were dark as she stalked towards the other leaders. A few RiverClan cats parted to talk to WindClan but Heartstorm stayed by Eelpaw's side. Finally, ThunderClan arrived, the barged past RiverClan, puffing out their chests and Heartstorm couldn't help but let out a small hiss.

"Oh it's *you*," said one of the ThunderClan cats in disgust. "The traitor."

"He's not a traitor!" snapped Eelpaw. Heartstorm fixed his gaze on the ThunderClan cat and finally, he turned away. The leaders leapt onto the large rock. Thornstar stepped forward first but Falconstar pushed past him. RiverClan let out angry cries and ThunderClan jeered and sniggered. Heartstorm sprang onto his feet and growled. Thornstar and Falconstar exchanged a few words. RiverClan waited, expecting Falconstar to go back and Thornstar to make his announcement but instead, Thornstar backed into the shadows. Heartstorm felt his fur raise.

"Heartstorm!" came a voice. It was Applenose. "Don't. Sit back down." Heartstorm took a deep breath and sat back down.

"ThunderClan is thriving! We have plenty of food!" announced Falconstar. ThunderClan roared with agreement and cheers. Heartstorm rolled his eyes. There was nothing special about it. "Oooh and RiverClan did try to claim our side of the river. Of course after a short talk, they backed away as cowards. And my warriors weren't even trying to scare them away." The red coloured cat Heartstorm had seen earlier that day sneered at them. RiverClan growled and hissed angrily while ThunderClan laughed and

cheered. Eelpaw shot onto his paws and lashed his tail angrily. Beestripe snapped at him to sit down and nodded to the clear sky and the bright moon.

"Remember the truce," said Beestripe. Eelpaw huffed and slumped down.

"Thank you, Falconstar," said Thornstar, stepping forward, his gaze dug into Falconstar then he turned to the clearing of cats. Heartstorm hoped he was going to address Falconstar's insult. "Well, you see you were right, my warriors did walk away. They didn't think ThunderClan was important enough to talk to. I mean, why waste their time talking to your *warriors* when they could be eating a fat vole?" Thornstar smiled pleasantly and Falconstar's eyes went wide. He hissed. RiverClan cheered and sneered at ThunderClan, nodding. Heartstorm turned to Eelpaw, grinning.

"He handled that well!" grinned Eelpaw. ThunderClan hissed and a few stepped forward but Falconstar, trying to stay calm, called them back. Thornstar smiled calmly and walked back to make way for Fawnstar.

"WindClan is proud to announce we have two new warriors!" she declared. WindClan sat up excitedly. "Ivyvine and Mintfur!" WindClan started chanting and cheering their names. Heartstorm turned to WindClan and spotted Ivyvine puffing out her chest next to Firecry who was shouting her name at the top of his lungs. He saw another cat, Mintfur, grinning broadly. Soon, ShadowClan and some reluctant ThunderClan joined in. RiverClan joined in as well, quite enthusiastically. Heartstorm found himself not saying anything. Then Cinderstar melted out of the shadows. Her pelt seemed darker and she was leaner than Heartstorm had remembered. Her fur was sleek and she seemed almost skinny. Her eyes were not carefree and happy, bright and shiny. They were dark and bore burden. She eyed the other Clans wearily. Then she laid her eyes on Heartstorm. Her look was so filled with hatred, Heartstorm looked away.

"ShadowClan," declared Cinderstar slowly. "Is strong. Stronger and more ruthless than any of the other Clans. We will

tear ThunderClan apart if they dare step *foot* into our territory. We will skin WindClan alive if they *dare* steal any of our prey. And we will *murder* all of RiverClan if you dare insult us." Her voice was loud and controlled. Heartstorm felt shivers run through his spine. Nobody said anything. Cinderstar watched the Gathering of cats calmly then walked down the rock. She flicked her tail and ShadowClan moved after her. Heartstorm recognised all of them, he avoided their gaze.

"The Gathering isn't over!" shouted Fawnstar. Falconstar emitted a small growl. WindClan, ThunderClan and RiverClan hissed as ShadowClan passed, angry at the threats.

"All the leaders have talked," retorted Cinderpelt and without another words, ShadowClan left. The clearing was silent. Then Thornstar stepped forward.

"Well, Cinderstar seems to be in a bad moon today," said Thornstar lightly. All the cats laughed and the tension wore off but Heartstorm saw worry etched in Thornstar's face. "Anyway, I haven't told you any news about RiverClan yet! We are striving! We have plenty of food! The river is running with plenty of fish! And we have a new warrior! Heartstorm!" RiverClan burst into happy cheers.

"Heartstorm! Heartstorm! Heartstorm!" chanted RiverClan and soon, WindClan joined in. Heartstorm grinned and puffed out his chest. ThunderClan, forgetting their small disagreement with RiverClan, started yelling out his name as well. It seemed RiverClan, ThunderClan and WindClan were all united in their anger for ShadowClan. Finally, the cries died down and Heartstorm caught Ivyvine's eye. She gave him a feeble smile then Firecry whispered something in her ear and she turned her attention back to him. The leaders leapt off the rock and the Clans merged, talking amiably. Heartstorm stayed at the side with Eelpaw.

"What do you think that was?" asked Eelpaw. "With ShadowClan. Cinderstar looked right at you!"

"I know," shuddered Heartstorm. "She seemed

paranoid."

"And mad," added Eelpaw. Heartstorm frowned.

"Yeah, guess she doesn't like me being in RiverClan," he said.

"She's the one who banished you!" exclaimed Eelpaw. "I bet she's regretting it."

"Probably," nodded Heartstorm with a grin. "But I'm not." Beestripe joined them and motioned with his tail.

"We're leaving now," he said. Thornstar was making his way away and Frogleap was right behind him. RiverClan understood the cue and they followed Thornstar through the tall grasses. They finally reached RiverClan. Everything was calm and the night was cool. Heartstorm was relieved to be back. Home. Heartstorm slumped into the warrior's den and onto his nest. He closed his eyes and drifted to sleep.

Ch. 24

Heartstorm leapt up and dug his claws into the bark. His paws burnt.

"Ow," he moaned. He flopped to the ground. Silverdrop peered at him with a passive face. He could see she was getting slightly annoyed.

"You're not even trying," she said with a frown.

"I am," huffed Heartstorm.

"You climbed more in the rain," pointed out Silverdrop. "Look, can you at least make it to the first branch. Then we can drop it and go hunt a fish or something."

"Fine," muttered Heartstorm. He took a deep breath and lunged up. He grabbed onto the bark and fixed his eyes up, onto the tree branch. He inched forward slowly, feeling his paws burning and his muscles aching. Finally, he heaved himself onto the first branch. He grinned down.

"I did it!" he cried.

"Not such a great accomplishement but good job," answered Silverdrop. Heartstorm laughed. He leapt down, landing squarely on his paws.

"How about the fish then?" suggested Heartstorm. Silverdrop smiled. She let Heartstorm lead her to the river bank. They splashed into the water. The nice cold water was refreshing to Heartstorm. The heat of the day was getting to him. He sunk his head into the water and let the cold water rush past him. He threw his head out and shook himself, sending droplets of water everywhere. Silverdrop giggled. Heartstorm loved seeing her smile. Her eyes would light up. Finally, after mucking around in the water

for a while, Heartstorm and Silverdrop got to hunting. They crouched low and waited for fish. Finally, Silverdrop tensed.

"Fish coming right now," she informed Heartstorm. He pricked his ears and watched the water intently. Suddenly, Silverdrop lashed out and he spotted a silver fish get caught in her sharp claws. She flung it out easily. "Other one!" Heartstorm watched as she killed another one by thrusting her head into the water. She emerged with the fish in her jaws. Heartstorm watched her in astonishment and awe. They slipped out of the river and sat near the river bank, basking in the sun and eating their fish. They made didn't talk, just listened to nature and the fish tearing. Heartstorm couldn't help thinking about Hawkkit.

"I might mentor Hawkkit," said Heartstorm suddenly. He felt like he needed to tell Silverdrop. She cocked her head.

"Did Thornstar ask you?" she asked. Heartstorm nodded.

"So why *might* you mentor him? If Thornstar asked you, and you said yes, you will mentor Hawkkit," said Silverdrop.

"He also asked Firebelly, Applenose and Wolfstep," explained Heartstorm. "He asked us who we'd like to mentor and I chose Hawkkit, so did Wolfstep."

"Why didn't you chose one of the kits the others didn't take?" asked Silverdrop.

"Nobody had chosen Hawkkit and I want to mentor Hawkkit, not Rosekit or Dustkit. I mean, nothing against them of course," said Heartstorm.

"Don't get worked up about that, there's nothing you can do about Thornstar's decision except maybe be more responsible. Otherwise, just don't worry about it," advised Silverdrop. Heartstorm wasn't absolutely sure about her advice but she was right. He nodded thankfully.

"Right then, should we get back to climbing?" she

said. Heartstorm groaned. She smiled.

"Come on, it was enough for today," said Heartstorm.

"You barely climbed one branch," pointed out Silverdrop.

"I did!" exclaimed Heartstorm. Silverdrop huffed.

"Fine, then let's do it tomorrow," said Silverdrop.

"Come on, we need a break. Maybe next moon," asked Heartstorm hopefully. Silverdrop rolled her eyes in exasperation.

"Tomorrow," said Silverdrop firmly. Heartstorm threw his head back but felt slightly happy. That meant he was going to see her. Heartstorm trotted back to camp feeling elated. He spotted Deerpaw. She rushed to his side excitedly.

"Moorpelt hinted I might not do the final assessment!" exclaimed Deerpaw.

"That's great!" said Heartstorm.

"I'll now in a moon," said Deerpaw. "I hope I won't have to do it. Adds stress, doesn't it? But I reckon even if I had to do it, I'd pass." Deerpaw shrugged. A dejected looking Eelpaw slunk towards them.

"What's wrong?" asked Deerpaw.

"Beestripe said I'll most probably do the assessment," huffed Eelpaw.

"You'll pass," assured Heartstorm.

"Ugh," groaned Eelpaw. "But that means Beestripe doesn't think I'm good enough just to become a warrior." Deerpaw was looking slightly smug but hid her face.

"Ah, well, you'll do fine," she told him with a small smile. He eyed her suspiciously.

"You're not doing the assessment are you?" he deduced.

"I don't know yet," said Deerpaw slowly. Eelpaw groaned and rolled his eyes.

"Great, so I'm the only incompetent one taking the assessment. What will Embergaze and Softcry say?" Eelpaw sighed.

"I did the assessment," pointed out Heartstorm.

"Yes, and you too will do it and pass," said a voice. The three friends turned to see Softcry. "I know you will, Eelpaw." Eelpaw cringed.

"How do you know?" he said.

"I know," said Softcry then leaned forward with a smile. "Also, I don't think anybody has ever failed and if you do, at least you'll be the first one to fail and people will have something to remember you by." Softcry winked and padded away.

"Ugh, Softcry thinks she's being a cool mum," he moaned.

"I think she's pretty funny," said Deerpaw. Heartstorm nodded. His eyes met with Deerpaw and Heartstorm caught each others eyes and burst into laughter while Eelpaw eyed them angrily but with amusement. They wandered together towards the stream, joking and laughing.

Ch. 25

Heartstorm finished his delicious fish and shook himself as he got up. He looked around and spotted Reedpelt. He trotted over to ask which patrols he would be able to take part in the next day. He had had a few days of climbing practise and lessons with Silverdrop and had finally convinced her to postpone them to the next half moon. Reedpelt spotted him coming over and smiled.

"Asking for patrols?" he said as Heartstorm reached him. Heartstorm nodded. "Well, I haven't planned any border patrols for tomorrow morning. I think you should lead one to WindClan." Heartstorm's eyes bulged.

"Me!" He gaped. Reedpelt seemed amused.

"Yes, you. You are a warrior, aren't you?" he said gently. Heartstorm nodded. "Then you can ask a few cats if they'd like to join your patrol." Heartstorm grinned.

"Right, thanks!" he said. Reedpelt winked and padded away. He had never led a patrol before or thought about leading one. He had gotten used to just joining some random patrols during the day but now he was leading one! And he got to chose who went on it! He headed for the apprentice den to ask Deerpaw and Eelpaw and realised they couldn't, they were apprentices. He thought about asking their mentors if he could be able to go but thought it unprofessional. If he was going to lead a patrol, he couldn't be talking and chatting to his best friends. He decided to go ask Sparkbelly. He headed for the warrior's den. An owl hooted and stars were starting to appear in the sky. Heartstorm poked his head into the den and spotted Sparkbelly, his eyes fixed at the other side of the den where Blacktail and Silverdrop rested.

"Hey Sparkbelly!" called Heartstorm. Sparkbelly looked up. He grinned.

"Hey," he answered.

"Wanna come on a border patrol with me tomorrow?" asked Heartstorm. Sparkbelly shrugged.

"Sure thing," he nodded. "When?"

"Sunrise," said Heartstorm. Sparkbelly nodded. Feeling victorious, he looked around for more willing cats. He knew Silverdrop didn't like these kinds of patrols. He had learnt to understand her. She served her Clan in her own way. Blacktail padded up to him.

"Do you think I could join?" she asked. Heartstorm was surprised but nodded enthusiastically. "You're growing to be a fine warrior." Heartstorm grinned broadly.

"Thanks," he said. She smiled at him and returned to her nest. Heartstorm curled up in his own next, thinking excitedly about the next day. He should find another cat to go as well but he thought he'd leave it to the next day. He fell asleep to a jumpy and excited feeling in his stomach.

Heartstorm blinked his eyes open. He was leading a patrol! He sprung to his feet, disturbing Acornheart in the process. He apologised to her quietly. He snuck out of the den and looked up. The sky was lightening. Stars were starting to disappear. He spotted Thornstar padding towards the medicine den. Then he spotted Rainfeather heading for him. She smiled at him.

"I heard you're leading a patrol," she said in a low voice. "Can I come?" Heartstorm nodded, feeling proud and happy.

"Sure," he grinned. Rainfeather smiled softly.

"Thank you, I'll be waiting right outside," she informed him and slipped towards the camp exit. Heartstorm turned around to some rustling. Sparkbelly emerged from the den, yawning widely.

"I don't know why I agreed to this," he muttered but grinned at Heartstorm. Heartstorm rolled his eyes in amusement.

"Rainfeather's waiting outside," said Heartstorm.

Sparkbelly nodded. Heartstorm followed him. He slipped through the tunnel and a minute later, Blacktail arrived.

"Early," she commented. "Even before the sunrise." She smiled at Heartstorm.

"Too early," yawned Sparkbelly. "Right, are we going?"

"Right! Yes!" said Heartstorm, slightly ashamed. He led the way towards WindClan. Sparkbelly trailed behind, yawning and mumbling. Blacktail and Rainfeather talked to each other amiably. They reached the quiet WindClan border. Suddenly, there was some rustling. Heartstorm flicked his tail, suddenly knowing he had to be in charge. Rainfeather and Blacktail ceased their talking and Sparkbelly stopped yawning and muttering. Heartstorm looked around and beckoned his patrol to back behind a few bushes. They watched WindClan apprehensively. There was some more noise and the strong smell of WindClan. Heartstorm had a feeling this wasn't just a normal patrol. Suddenly his eyes went wide and he spotted movement on their side of the river. He knew his Clanmates were watching as well. Then a cat emerged walking in RiverClan. Heartstorm growled.

"Trespassers!" he roared. He stepped out of the bushes and the WindClan cat's eyes went wide. Heartstorm recognised him as Galestrike. Galestrike barred his teeth and behind him two more warriors followed by a last emerged, dragging a squirrel. Heartstorm snarled. They were stealing their prey! Sparkbelly tensed behind him and hissed.

"You stole our prey!" snapped Heartstorm. The WindClan warriors hissed defiantly.

"It was in our territory first!" informed one of the cats Heartstorm knew as Foxstep.

"But it ran into ours! You are on our territory!" snapped Blacktail angrily lashing her tail. Galestrike snarled.

"What are you going to do about it?" he hissed. Heartstorm saw the other cats looking for the tunnel leading back

to their territory. Heartstorm wasn't going to let this happen. He was leading the patrol. He had to take charge. Heartstorm marched forward, making the WindClan's attention fall onto him. The WindClan warriors growled and crouched.

"You will regret ever stealing prey from us!" snarled Heartstorm, lashing his tail. With that, he flicked his tail slightly meaning they were to advance and they would scare WindClan out of their territory. Heartstorm then leapt out, claws unsheathed onto Galestrike. Chaos broke out. Heartstorm didn't care about anything but punishing the cats on their border. Heartstorm dug his claws into Galestrike. He drew blood and Galestrike yowled in pain. He rolled away from Heartstorm and Heartstorm was aware of Blacktail taking on Foxstep and Rainfeather and Sparkbelly fighting as well. Heartstorm didn't think, he sprung forward and Galestrike was knocked off his feet. Heartstorm lashed out and felt blood spray in his face. Suddenly, he was on his back and Galestrike had his ear clamped in his mouth. Heartstorm twisted around and scraped his claws along Galestrike's side. Clumps of fur flew everywhere. Galestrike cried out in anger. Heartstorm then went for a back kick and to his surprise and joy, Galetrstrike was thrown down. Heartstorm leapt at him and batted at his ears. Galestrike struggled away and bit into Heartstorm's shoulder. Pain flare through Heartstorm's body but he ignored it. Without a word, Heartstorm felt power and strength surge through him. He had to protect RiverClan. He was fighting for RiverClan. He flung Galestrike off him and tumbling down towards the river. He spotted Sparkbelly having a hard time with a she-cat and bounded to his aid. Heartstorm felt blood flowing out of his wounds but didn't care. He flung himself onto the she-cat who toppled to the ground. Sparkbelly caught her tail and bit in hard while Heartstorm wrestled with her. He tried to remember all he had learnt from Blacktail. He brought his front paw out and hit the she-cat on the head hard. She seemed dazed for a while and Sparkbelly managed to claw her on the belly while Heartstorm bit into her ear. He tasted sweet blood and the she-cat yelped in pain. She lashed out blindly and caught Heartstorm on his front paw. He limped back and she shot away, finding the tunnel back to WindClan. Now only Foxstep and the other WindClan warrior was left. Blacktail was battling ferociously at Foxstep. Sparkbelly rushed to help Rainfeather while

Heartstorm headed for Blacktail. He came from behind and bit into Foxstep's tail. Blacktail took the distraction and pushed Foxstep to the ground. She batted at his head and he swept out madly. He managed to bite into Blacktail's front paw and Heartstorm felt his strong blows to his side. He didn't care though, he bit into Foxstep's shoulder until he let go of Blacktail and stumbled to his feet. Blacktail hissed.

"Get out of our territory or next time will be worst!" spat Heartstorm in warning. Foxstep managed a weak growl then fled. The other warrior was also running away from Rainfeather and Sparkbelly. The four RiverClan cats watched as the WindClan cats fled and Heartstorm stood, panting heavily. He saw that none of them were badly injured. Blacktail's bite seemed the worst. Heartstorm told Sparkbelly and Rainfeather to mark the border while he checked that the WindClan cats really were gone. When they were done, Heartstorm helped Blacktail walk back to camp. He felt responsible for the group of cats and proud that they had won. They entered camp and some cats gasped while others padded around them. Heartstorm ordered for a path to be cleared and helped Blacktail to the medicine den. He shouted for Sparkbelly to see Frogleap as well. Sparkbelly who was busy telling everyone what had happened huffed and followed Rainfeather and Heartstorm into the medicine den. Frogleap was already attending to Blacktail.

"Heartstorm is more injured," Blacktail was saying. Frogleap glanced at Heartstorm and nodded.

"I'll get to you," he assured. Heartstorm suddenly now felt the adrenaline slip away and the burning of the scratches started to hurt more. Frogleap tended to Blacktail quickly and told her to rest for a day then turned to Heartstorm. He applied something to Heartstorm's bite on the shoulder which stung like mad.

"Ow," muttered Heartstorm, his eyes watering.

"It's bound to hurt a little," said Frogleapt. Just then Reedpelt and Heartstorm entered.

"Are you all alright?" asked Thornstar. The four warriors nodded. "Frogleapt?"

"Yes, a few minor scratches and bites. Heartstorm got off the worst," said Frogleapt. Heartstorm looked around, Sparkbelly had a few scratches on his muzzle and was making a weird face while Rainfeather had blood running down her left hind paw.

"What happened?" ashed Reedpelt.

"It was WindClan," said Heartstorm, seeing all the expecting faces his patrol were giving him. "We saw the dragging a squirrel from our territory. They were going back to WindClan but we intervened. I'm sorry if it wasn't the right thing to do but I didn't just want them to leave. Thornstar nodded thoughtfully.

"Did you talk to them first? Or did you jump into battle?" asked Thornstar.

"He was a great patrol leader," said Blacktail. "He did talk a bit to them first but they were rude about it. Heartstorm made a good decision in my opinion." Thornstar and Reedpelt nodded.

"So what happened exactly?" asked Reedpelt.

"I fought this she-cat, she was lean and vicious!" exclaimed Sparkbelly. "And there were three others, we all took on one. When we thought they'd had enough, we let them flee like cowards back to their border." Thornstar nodded. Heartstorm's heart beat fast, hoping he hadn't made any rash decisions.

"You did well, Heartstorm," said Thornstar. "And it was your first time leading a patrol."

"Thanks," mumbled Heartstorm.

"I don't know what Fawnstar will have to say for herself," said Thornstar then nodded to the four cats. "Good job all of you, you did well protecting RiverClan." With that, Thornstar and Reedpelt padded out. Reedpelt gave Heartstorm an encouraging

wink as he walked by. Finally, Frogleap finished applying some stinging herbs on Heartstorm.

"You are not to go out hunting or on border patrol for a day and a half," instructed Frogleap. Heartstorm nodded. "You may go." Heartstorm headed out and felt curious eyes on him. He felt calm. He hadn't felt scared, fighting those cats. If he was going to die, he'd die for his Clan, RiverClan. And he had successfully defended RiverClan. He couldn't help but beam.

Ch. 26

Heartstorm gazed at the cats wandering about the camp. He sighed slowly. He couldn't wait to get back to going on patrols. He spotted on the other side of the clearing Stripedfur and her kits. They scuttled towards the stream, screaming excitedly. Acornheart trotted to them, a smile on her face. She exchanged a few words with Stripedfur then led the kits away. Stripedfur spotted Heartstorm and smiled. She padded over.

"How long are you not allowed to go out?" she asked kindly.

"A day and a half," explained Heartstorm with a small sigh.

"Well, at least you're not stuck in camp like me," she said. Heartstorm grimaced at the thought.

"Why don't you go out?" asked Heartstorm. "While they're with Acornheart?"

"I was just about to," she said. "But you need company."

"It's alright. You've been stuck in camp for like five moons," said Heartstorm.

"Yes, and I think I'll be able to wait a few more minutes," she said. Heartstorm was glad for the company. They talked about the weather then changed to the kits and finally, Stripedfur asked about what had happened a day ago.

"You did well," remarked Stripedfur.

"Yeah well I had Blacktail, Rainfeather and Sparkbelly," said Heartstorm, licking his stomach in embarrassment and pride.

"But you were leading the patrol," pointed out Stripedfur. "Anyways, I heard you wanted to be Hawkkit's mentor. I think you'd do well."

"Wolfstep is going to mentor Hawkkit," said Heartstorm, feeling happy that Stripedfur wanted him to mentor Hawkkit.

"I heard," nodded Stripedfur. "You both would be great mentors. It'll be up to Thornstar of course but since you know Hawkkit well I think you'd be a great mentor to him.

"Thanks," said Heartstorm. Stripedfur said goodbye to Heartstorm and headed for the camp entrance. Heartstorm rested his head on his paws and closed his eyes for a nap. They day seemed like it would never end. There wasn't much to do in camp when he just wanted to get out and go check the WindClan border. What if they decided to cross it again. Heartstorm almost growled at the thought. He ached to go check our just go out for a fresh walk. He wondered if he could ask Frogleap if he could. Heartstorm pricked his ears as he heard some loud chattering. Sparkbelly brushed into camp followed by Cloudbreeze and Greyspeck. He was talking loudly and excitedly.

"Then I swiped his eye and blood sprayed out of his eyes," Sparkbelly was saying. "Then she fled like a coward! She was crying and begging for me to have mercy, as if! Then I turned around and I saw Heartstorm! He was fighting this nasty big WindClan warrior. Heartstorm was thrown down and I rushed to his aid. I pushed off the cat and I fought of the cat, Heartstorm was so badly hurt if I hadn't intervened.., he would not have made it." Greyspeck was watching him slight amusement and disinterest but Cloudbreeze was goggling with a slightly open mouth. Heartstorm rolled his eyes. Sparkbelly spotted him and grinned. He trotted over to Heartstorm.

"Hey, how is your wound doing?" he asked brightly.

"Better," grunted Heartstorm. "So you saved my from a nasty WindClan warrior, did you?"

"Well,...," Sparkbelly thought. "Sorta."

"Thanks," mumbled Heartstorm with a small smile.

"Thornstar will definitely chose you to be Hawkkit's mentor now," said Sparkbelly knowingly. Heartstorm shrugged.

"I just fought some WindClan cats with you guys," said Heartstorm. "It wasn't much."

"But it was! It was your first real fight!" exclaimed Sparkbelly. Heartstorm opened his mouth to object but closed it once more. He had had a few fights in ShadowClan but he didn't want to remember them. He tried to push away the battle with the rogues out of his mind.

"I'm going to see the elders," said Heartstorm, wanting to get away from Sparkbelly. Sparkbelly shrugged and Heartstorm headed away.

Heartstorm waited impatiently.

"Yes, it's alright," said Frogleap finally. Heartstorm gave a sigh of relief and grinned.

"Thanks," said Heartstorm and he bounded out of the cramped medicine den. He headed for the entrance and brushed out of the tunnel and into the open. He smelt the fresh air and trotted into the bright forest happily. He had only been cooped up in camp for a day and a half, but already, he was so happy to be out. He couldn't imagine how it was for Stripedfur. He made his way towards the river. He sniffed at the fresh air and pricked his ears at the happy song of the birds and the gentle rushing of water. As he approached the river, he spotted a silver she-cat. It was Silverdrop. Heartstorm's heart raced and he slowed down. He had felt like this before. When he had had a crush on Ivyvine. But somehow, this time, he didn't want to waste it, he didn't want to ruin it. He walked slowly towards the river bank.

"You're finally out," said Silverdrop. She turned to face him, her eyes sparkling. She smiled kindly. Heartstorm nodded.

"You alright?" Heartstorm nodded.

"So, how about those climbing lessons?" asked Silverdrop. Heartstorm's eyes widened. He liked Silverdrop (although he didn't really want to admit it to himself) but it did not extend to letting her teach him to climb.

"Nope," said Heartstorm firmly. "I'm not changing my mind. Maybe next moon." Silverdrop rolled her eyes.

"Come on," she said. "You've got to know how to climb. You're a cat."

"Cats don't need to know how to climb," Heartstorm pointed out.

"Stupid kittypets don't," corrected Silverdrop. "But you're not. You're a warrior."

"A RiverClan warrior, I swim," pointed out Heartstorm. "How about we swim?" Heartstorm now found swimming relaxing and probably his most favourite thing to do when he just wanted to chill and relax. He loved feeling the gentle pull of the river and feeling the rush of water around him.

"RiverClan warriors don't just swim," said Silverdrop sourly. "And fine." She followed Heartstorm into the river. The water was cool and sent shivers down Heartstorm's spine but he liked it. He paddled slowly, letting the river pull him forward. He let himself float and slowly, they made it down the river. Silverdrop joined his side.

"So, you still having dreams?" asked Heartstorm. Silverdrop didn't answer at first. Heartstorm was scared he had offended her.

"I told you, I have them every night," she told him. "And they're nightmares of reality."

"Oh," said Heartstorm, he didn't know she still had nightmares. They mustn't be too bad then...

"They're horrible," said Silverdrop softly. "It didn't help when I talked to you." Heartstorm was about to protest but she glared at him. She splashed him with water and he flailed. He spat out water and rolled his eyes.

"They made them worst. As if to make my worries even worst than they already are," continued Silverdrop.

"I'm sorry," said Heartstorm. He didn't know what to say. "I won't die."

"I see you die. Everynight," said Silverdrop seriously.

"It's not real," assured Heartstorm.

"They are," she said.

"When did they start?" asked Heartstorm.

"When you arrived in RiverClan," said Silverdrop.

"Look, please don't worry about me," Heartstorm said seriously. He didn't like Silverdrop's face when she was worried. Her eyes were dark and clouded with thoughts and worries. Her mouth was twisted and she seemed so troubled. He wanted the happy Silverdrop. It hurt him to think it was him who made her feel like that. He stopped and pulled himself out of the water. Silverdrop followed suite. Heartstorm let the sun dry his fur and approached Silverdrop. She looked down.

"I don't want you to die," she whispered.

"I won't," assured Heartstorm.

"I hate it...," she whispered. "I hate it.... I hate seeing you die."

"Those dreams are not true, I'm not leaving. I'm not dying," said Heartstorm soothingly.

"My dreams are always true."

Ch. 27

Heartstorm shifted uncomfortably. Deerpaw and Eelpaw joined his side, both talking excitedly.

"You alright?" asked Deerpaw anxiously, peering at Heartstorm. He couldn't get himself to speak. Thornstar had just called a Clan meeting.

"I'm sure you're going to be chosen," said Eelpaw excitedly. Heartstorm wasn't so sure. He spotted Sparkbelly, Wolfstep and Applenose sitting just beneath Thornstar. Reedpelt and Froglpea were right next to them. Heartstorm had a bad nagging feeling that he was not going to be a mentor.

"Rosekit, Dustkit and Hawkkit, please come forward," echoed Thornstar. Heartstorm turned to see Rosekit and Dustkit scrambling forward excitedly. Hawkkit padded behind them, trying to stay calm. Rosekit had a large beam on her face and Dustkit was grinning. They clambered next to Thornstar.

"Rosekit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Rosepaw. Your mentor will be Applenose. I hope Applenose will pass down all he knows on to you," declared Thornstar. Rosekit was practically jumping. Heartstorm felt his stomach lurch.

"Applnose, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You have received excellent training from Lightdapple, and you have shown yourself to be brave and quick thinking. You will be the mentor of Rosepaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to Rosepaw," said Thornstar. Applenose nodded and touched noses with Rosepaw, whispering something in her ear. Heartstorm saw Stripedfur and Moorpelt out of the corner of his eye, they were both beaming with pride. Thornstar repeated the process with Dustkit, telling him, with no surprise, that Sparkbelly would be his mentor. Then it was Hawkkit's turn. Heartstorm was shaking.

"Heartstorm!" said Eelpaw softly. "You'll be fine! Hawkpaw will definitely be mentored by you!" Heartstorm wasn't so sure though.

"Hawkkit, you as well, have now reached the age of six moons and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, till you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Hawkpaw. Your mentor will be...," Thornstar looked up and Heartstorm urged him to look at him but instead, he looked directly at Wolfstep. Heartstorm's heart dropped. "Wolfstep. I know Wolfstep will pass down to you all he knows." Hawkkit beamed and shot a happy look at Heartstorm but Heartstorm wasn't looking. Deerpaw and Eelpaw were whispering apologies and encouragements to Heartstorm but he wasn't listeining to them. Thornstar had chosen Wolfstep. Heartstorm brushed away from Deerpaw and Eelpaw just as Wolfstep and Hawkkit were touching noses. He marched out of camp. His feelings were mixed. He didn't understand them. He had known he would not have been chosen but still feeling the disappointment was too much to bear. Thornstar had not chosen him. He headed for the river to cool down. He accidentally let out a growl of frustration.

"You weren't chosen," came a calm voice. Heartstorm spun around to snap back but his breath was taken away. It was Silverdrop. He didn't say anything, just swallowed. "I don't think Thornstar will appreciate you walking out on an apprentice ceremony." Heartstorm knew Silverdrop was only pointing out the obvious but she wasn't trying to make him feel better so he growled.

"You didn't even attend it," he snarled angrily. Silverdrop watched him with her beautiful, sparkling eyes.

"I knew you'd come out and someone would have to talk sense into you," she said smoothly.

"You knew I wouldn't have been chosen," Heartstorm hissed.

"I didn't know, I had my suspicions," she said.

"Go away," snapped Heartstorm and he swivelled around. Silverdrop caught up with him.

"Hawkpaw will be disappointed. You need to go back and congratulate him and Wolfstep," Silverdrop said.

"Why would I listen to you?" snapped Heartstorm.

"I'm sorry you weren't chosen," Silverdrop said finally. Heartstorm stopped and turned to stare at her. She did look slightly sad. "But you need to show respect to Wolfstep and Hawkpaw. I'm not asking for you to apologise, just to congratulate them. I understand if you resent Thornstar. That is acceptable, but it was not Wolfstep or Hawkpaw's choice." Heartstorm finally saw sense in Silverdrop's words.

"Fine," he mumbled.

"I'll come as well," said Silverdrop gently. Heartstorm headed back to camp. He slipped through the tunnel with Silverdrop right behind him. He spotted Hawkpaw and Wolfstep talking. Rosepaw and Dustpaw were all talking to a group of warriors. Their mentors by their side, beaming and chatting as well.

"Hawkpaw!" called Heartstorm. Hawkpaw turned and grinned. He rushed to Heartstorm.

"I'm an apprentice!" he cried.

"I know! I'm so proud of you," said Heartstorm, finding it hard to be mad faced to someone so cute. He found himself speaking freely without needing to think. "I know you're going to be the greatest warrior." Hawkpaw smiled happily.

"Thanks Heartstorm," he gushed.

"Hey," said Wolfstep, padding over. He glanced at Hawkpaw with pride.

"Congratulations," said Heartstorm.

"Thank you," said Wolfstep. "I'm sorry you weren't chosen." Heartstorm found himself not minding too much anymore.

"It's alright, you'll be a great mentor," said Heartstorm. Wolfstep dipped his head and Silverdrop congratulated him as well.

"Well, I think I'm going to show Hawkpaw our territory now," said Wolfstep. Hawkpaw's ears pricked and he jumped to Hawkpaw's side.

"Really?" he cried excitedly. Heartstorm smiled. Hawkpaw flashed Heartstorm a smile and followed Wolfstep away. Heartstorm watched them slightly happier.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" said Silverdrop. Heartstorm shook his head. She smiled kindly. Deerpaw and Eelpaw trotted up to Heartstorm, shooting him worried looks.

"You mad?" they asked.

"Nah," said Heartstorm lightly.

"Guess what?" exclaimed Deerpaw. "Moorpelt just confirmed I wouldn't need and assessment and said I would be a warrior in a few days!" Heartstorm gasped.

"That's great!" he cried.

"It's probably cos he was in a good mood because of his kits," said Eelpaw sadly. "I'm going to need an assessment, Beestripe just told me."

"It's fine," said Heartstorm. "I did it too, it's pretty easy actually." Eelpaw looked at him disbelievingly.

"You'll be fine," assured Heartstorm.

"I know you will!" added Deerpaw.

"Deerpaw!" called Moorpelt. Deerpaw turned around, shouted bye and sped off.

"I have the day off," said Eelpaw. "Beestripe told me I had to ask you if I could have climbing lessons." Eelpaw was talking to Silverdrop who was watching him weirdly.

"You don't need lessons," she said.

"Beestripe said so!" exclaimed Eelpaw. Heartstorm knew how much Eelpaw loved climbing.

"Come on, he'll be a better student that me," said Heartstorm. Silverdrop glared at him.

"Fine," she said finally. Heartstorm grinned with amusement as he watched her walking away with Eelpaw, pestering her with questions.

Ch. 28

"Heartstorm!" yelled Deerpaw. Heartstorm turned around. He had just been about to ask Reedpelt if he could lead a border patrol.

"Hey," he grinned. "What happened?"

"Moorpelt hinted I might become a warrior tomorrow!" she squealed. Heartstorm gasped then beamed.

"That's great!" he exclaimed and he meant it. He couldn't wait to have his best friend in the same den again. He couldn't wait for both Eelpaw and Deerpaw to become warriors and to go on patrols together.

"Yes?" said Reedpelt, trotted over. Heartstorm turned to him.

"Could I lead a patrol?" asked Heartstorm. Reedpelt nodded.

"We need one for this afternoon," informed Reedpelt.

"Great, thanks," said Heartstorm. "To ThunderClan border?"

"Yes," nodded Reedpelt.

"I wonder what my warrior name will be?" said Deerpaw once Reedpelt had given her a proud smile then padded away.

"Imagine Deerstorm," said Heartstorm. "And Eelpaw would be Eelstorm. Then we'd be Heartstorm, Eelstorm and Deerstorm." Deerpaw giggled.

"I think Deerdapple would be nice," said Deerpaw thoughtfully. "And for Eelpaw I was thinking Eelfrost. What do you

think?"

"I wanna be Eelstar," came a voice. Heartstorm turned to see Eelpaw trotting to their side.

"Ha," said Deerpaw. "As if."

"Hey," said Eelpaw in a hurt face.

"Eelstar is cool," nodded Heartstorm. Just then, Moorpelt appeared.

"Deerpaw, we're going," he said.

"Bye guys!" cried Deerpaw.

"Bye Deerstorm," said Heartstorm.

"Bye," called Eelpaw.

"It's Deerdapple," called back Deerpaw.

"I need to find people for my patrol," said Heartstorm, looking around.

"Leading another patrol?" said Eelpaw. "Imagine you get attacked again?"

"We didn't get attacked, *we* attacked," corrected Heartstorm. "This time we'll be going to ThunderClan territory. They've been marking their territory a lot more. I only went yesterday and I could smell them before even seeing the river!"

"I hate ThunderClan," spat Eelpaw. Just then Wolfstep trotted to Heartstorm.

"Are you leading the afternoon patrol?" he asked.

"Yeah," nodded Heartstorm.

"Great," said Wolfstep. "Could Hawkpaw and I join? I think it'll be good for him to go on patrols. It'll be his first one." Heartstorm wanted to snap no but Wolfstep hadn't done

anything wrong and how could he possibly turn down Hawkpaw.

"Sure," said Heartstorm. Wolfstep thanked him and padded away to join Hawkpaw who was waiting at the camp entrance, excited.

"Eelpaw," called a voice. It was Beestripe. "Come here a moment." Beestripe stood next to Softcry. Eelpaw rolled his eyes.

"I gotta go," he muttered and left. Heartstorm trotted to the warrior's den. He spotted Silverdrop resting. He debated asking her to go on the patrol.

"Are you going to stand there all day?" she asked, looking up. "Or are you going to talk to me?" Heartstorm looked down in embarrassment but padded over to Silverdrop.

"What's up?" she asked.

"I was wondering if you'd like to come on a border patrol with me," said Heartstorm nervously. He didn't even know why he was scared.

"Just us?" she asked.

"Well, obviously not but like...," Heartstorm said.

"I'd prefer just hanging out with you," said Silverdrop. Heartstorm's heart sped up and he beamed idiotically.

"Really?" he stammered. Silverdrop cocked her head and smiled.

"Sure," she said.

"Thanks," said Heartstorm.

"So do you wanna go out just both of us tonight?" she asked.

"Really?" said Heartstorm.

"Really. Look at Silverpelt," she beamed dreamily, "listen to the gentle breeze. See the bright moon." Heartstorm nodded vigorously then turned to find someone else to go on patrol. He trotted happily out of the den, the words "I'd prefer just hanging out with you" replayed in his head. He grinned. He headed for Stripedfur who was talking with Sparkbelly with Dustpaw nearby.

"Bye Dustpaw," said Stripedfur. "Have fun and listen to Sparkbelly!" Sparkbelly smiled and Dustpaw nodded before trotted behind Sparkbelly.

"Hey, Stripedfur, do you want to come on patrol with us?" asked Heartstorm.

"Of course!" exclaimed Stripedfur. "Thank you. I'm so happy to be back to my warrior duties."

"It's this afternoon," informed Heartstorm. "To ThunderClan border."

"Great!" exclaimed Stripedfur. Heartstorm turned to rest in the shade and think about Silverdrop.

Heartstorm spotted Wolfstep and Hawkpaw padding towards him. He felt his stomach jolt. Stripedfur was already waiting by his side.

"Hey," said Wolfstep in greeting. Hawkpaw joined them and beamed.

"Hi Stripedfur, are you coming too?" exclaimed Hawkpaw happily. Stripedfur smiled gently. Heartstorm hadn't thought about how awkward it might be letting Stripedfur and Hawkpaw go on the same patrol but Hawkpaw didn't seem to mind. They headed out. Wolfstep trotted by Heartstorm's side while Hawkpaw asked questions.

"Heartstorm! We went swimming today!" said Hawkpaw. "And Wolfstep said I was better than any cat my age! He said you did very well to teach my right when I was small!"

Heartstorm smiled happily and cast Wolfstep a look who was smiling.

"Yes, you are a strong swimmer," agreed Wolfstep. Stripedfur was beaming with pride. Soon, Heartstorm could smell ThunderClan. They emerged from the trees and Hawkpaw went silent. He crinkled his nose.

"Ew," he coughed. Wolfstep frowned.

"ThunderClan is getting more confident," he growled softly. Stripedfur spat.

"I didn't remember how bad they smelt," she muttered. Heartstorm gazed around and felt as if he was being watched. He shrugged the feeling off and turned to Hawkpaw.

"Do you want to mark the border?" he asked. Hawkpaw grinned and nodded quickly. He marked the borders while Heartstorm marked it a bit further off with Stripedfur. Suddenly, on the other side, ThunderClan warriors appeared. There were five of them. Large and angry. Heartstorm returned to Wolfstep and Hawkpaw. They stood on the otherside of the river to meet the ThunderClan cats. Heartstorm tried to calm his breathing. The cats looked scary but there was a river separating. Heartstorm needed to take charge. He could hear Hawkpaw growling behind him.

"Ah, Heartstorm the traitor," sang one of the warriors.

"Hey, look, a tiny apprentice, you lost kit?" taunted another. Hawkpaw snarled angrily. Wolfstep calmed him with a flick of the tail. Stripedfur though was angrier and spat at the ThunderClan cats.

"We haven't done anything to confront you yet," said Heartstorm as calmly as possible.

"Well, just you being alive is pretty disappointing," said a grey tabby. The other cats laughed.

Heartstorm felt his fur rising but he let it lie flat once more. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Hawkpaw silently fuming.

"Good day to you then," sneered Heartstorm and he swivelled around. There was nothing they could do now. Either they could keep throwing insults or just leave. ThunderClan wasn't worth his time, he decided. Wolfstep was right behind, dragging Hawkpaw behind him. They padded to the shelter of the trees and Stripedfur huffed.

"I didn't remember how much I hated ThunderClan. But I am now reminded," she muttered.

"They're so mean!" exclaimed Hawkpaw. "Why didn't you let me tear them apart?" Hawkpaw glared at Heartstorm and Wolfstep. Heartstorm didn't think this fair and frowned.

"you've only been an apprentice for a day," said Heartstorm sternly. "And they outnumbered us. Don't get too ahead of yourself." Hawkpaw grunted but Wolfstep nodded his agreement.

"Are we going back?" asked Hawkpaw.

"We've already marked the border," said Heartstorm. "We should head back to camp now. I need to report to Thornstar."

"Alright, thanks then," said Wolfstep. "We will part with you now." Heartstorm nodded and watched Hawkpaw follow Wolfstep away to learn more. Heartstorm and Stripedfur headed back to camp. The taunts of ThunderClan replayed in Heartstorm's mind and he was tempted to run back to them and claw their pelts off. He growled at the thought of them. They thought they were so strong and mighty. But they weren't.

"Heartstorm," called Thornstar. Heartstorm's head snapped up. He hadn't realised they had already reached camp.

"ThunderClan is getting more and more arrogant," reported Heartstorm sourly. "We marked the border but they appeared and started yelling insults at us. Their border was already marked well though, we could smell it from the trees."

"Yes, ThunderClan is getting more prudent," said Thornstar under his breath. Heartstorm watched Thornstar with a slight prickle of anger. Thornstar had chosen Wolfstep, not him.

"Thank you," said Thornstar finally and padded away. Heartstorm watched him go with hate.

Ch. 29

"I did it!" cried Eelpaw running up to Heartstorm and Deerpaw who were talking under the shade of trees. "I did the assessment today! It wasn't too bad, I think I got extra points for climbing extra well and catching a squirrel while it was climbing. But I might have failed fighting... I think I did really bad.... What if I'm an apprentice forever! Oh no, what would Softrcry and Embergaze think?!" Heartstorm rolled his eyes in amusement but Deerpaw took Eelpaw seriously and looked aghast.

"You can't be an apprentice forever!" she exclaimed. "That's not possible! It can't be possible!"

"You're not going to be an apprentice forever," said Heartstorm. "Of course not, nobody is an apprentice forever."

"May all cats old enough to hunt fish in the river please gather," declared Thornstar, leaping up onto the High Rock. Heartstorm glanced at Eelpaw and Deerpaw excitedly and trotted to the front of the High Rock. Eelpaw and Deerpaw followed suite. Eelpaw was shivering with anticipation and worry.

"Don't worry," whispered Heartstorm. "You passed." Eelpaw wasn't listening. He kept shaking his head. Soon, everyone was gathered and Thornstar looked down on Eelpaw and Deerpaw.

"Eelpaw and Deerpaw, please step forward," called Thornstar. Eelpaw squeaked and leapt to his feet. Deerpaw, more calmly, padded up to the High Rock, passing Moorpelt who was wearing a similar expression he had when he was watching his kits becoming apprentices. Deerpaw and Eelpaw joined Thornstar at the High Rock. Heartstorm was almost quivering with happiness and joy. He couldn't wait for them to become warriors and they could go out on hunting and border patrols together, spend their time having fun together and joking around. He knew life as a warrior would be so much better with his two best friends. Silverdrop slipped in next to Heartstorm. He beamed at her, he couldn't

contain his happiness.

"I, Thornstar, leader of RiverClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice, Deerpaw. She has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend her to you as a warrior in her turn," announced Thornstar grandly then turned to Deerpaw. "Deerpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" Deerpaw took a deep breath, glancing down at Reedpelt who was smiling proudly.

"I do," she said loudly and bravely although her voice was slighlty quavering. Heartstorm could almost hear her heart racing and her mind thinking "I'm becoming a warrior, I'm becoming a warrior, I'm becoming a warrior".

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Deerpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Deerflame. StarClan honors your intelligence and patience, and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan," Thornstar said. Heartstorm felt his heart leap and grinned up at Deerflame. Deerflame beamed happily and turned to Thornstar who rested his muzzle on her forehead. Deerflame licked Thornstar's shoulder then turned to Eelpaw and whispered excitedly in his ear. Eelpaw gulped, clearly nervous. Heartstorm glanced back and spotted Softcry and Embergaze, huddled together, looking up with pride at Eelpaw. He turned back to the High Rock and out of the corner of his eye he saw Beestripe straighten up, beaming happily for Eelpaw. Thornstar turned to Eelpaw and beckoned him nearer.

"I, Thornstar, leader of RiverClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on Eelpaw. He has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend him to you as a warrior in his turn," announced Thornstar and turned to face Eelpaw. "Eepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" Eelpaw looked like he was about to burst. He nodded excitedly.

"I do!" he cried happily. Heartstorm gave out a small laugh.

"They by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Eelpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Eelfrost. StarClan honours your determination and perseverance and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan," declared Thornstar. Eelfrost turned to the crowd, grinning happily, he looked down at Softcry and Embergaze who smiled proudly back at him. Thornstar padded to Eelfrost and rested his muzzle on Eelfrost's forehead then Eelfrost licked his shoulder. The Clan burst into cheers. Heartstorm leapt to his feet and raced to meet the new warriors, hollering their names as loudly as he could.

"Eelfrost! Deerflame! Eelfrost! Deerflame!" chanted all the RiverClan cats. Hearstorm reached Deerflame who was smiling happily, being circled by RiverClan. Everybody padded up to the new warriors, giving them their congratulations.

"Deerflame," Heartstorm said as finally the crowd parted.

"Hey Heartstorm," grinned Eelfrost. "My name's cooler than yours."

"As if!" exclaimed Heartstorm. "I could be Heartfrost."

"Imagine if I was Eelstorm," laughed Eelfrost. Deerflame rolled her eyes.

"No name is better than the other, alright?" she said fiercely.

"Chill," grinned Heartstorm. "Congratulations guys, we're going to be in the same den once again. I'll show you your nests. They're gigantic and warm!" Beestripe and Moorpelt padded up to Deerflame and Eelfrost and said their congratulations and exchanged a few words before padding off.

"Eelfrost," said Deerflame firmly. "Heartstorm can show us our nests but we need to set vigil, remember?" Eelfrost huffed.

"Yeah of course," he muttered. He exchanged a look with Heartstorm and they both burst out in laughter.

"Come on," said Heartstorm, leading them to the warrior's den. Deerflame didn't move. "Deerflame, you too."

"Oh alright," she relented and followed them, smiling slightly.

"It's so big!" exclaimed Eelfrost as he stepped into the warrior's den. Softcry trotted to Eelfrost's side.

"I'm so proud of you," she smiled. She nuzzled him and Eelfrost gave a small sigh but gave Softcry an affectionate lick on the cheek. Heartstorm showed Eelfrost and Deerflame to two empty nests. They tried it out and Eelfrost even tried to sleep in it, hoping Deerflame had forgotten about the vigil but sadly, she had not.

"Eelfrost, we should go outside now," she said firmly. "Come on, oh don't give me that face. You know very well we need to set vigil. Come on, get out!" Eelfrost huffed and grumpily got out of his nest. He glanced at Heartstorm who shrugged, happy he got to sleep in his nest. They both padded out, saying goodnight to Heartstorm and exchanging a few jokes. Heartstorm returned to his nest for some rest, feeling hapy for his best friends.

Ch. 30

Heartstorm woke up to someone tugging at his ear. Was he late? He was going to miss training? His eyes went wide and he sprang up. Was Blacktail waiting for him? He was face to face with Eelfrost.

"Wow," he said. "It's just me."

"Oh sorry," huffed Heartstorm. "For a moment I thought I was an apprentice again." Deerflame appeared behimd Eelfrost.

"Do you want to go on a patrol with us?" asked Deerflame, coming forward. "We thought you could lead one, since well, you've already led a few."

"Sure," said Heartstorm happily. He was glad he'd be able to spend time with his best friends much more now. "How was the vigil?"

"Uncomfortable," groaned Eelfrost.

"It was great," said Deerflame, rolling her eyes at Eelfrost.

"Doesn't it feel weird?" grinned Eelfrost. "Not having to find Beestripe and going for training. I mean, we can do whatever we want today. Like just hang out in the river. We're warriors."

"Exactly," noted Deerflame. "Which means we need to serve our Clan which does not mean we are going to be hanging out all day in the river."

"Deerflame, since when were you my mother?" asked Eelfrost. "I mean, you always were up for something fun."

"I was an apprentice," said Deerflame dismissively. "I'm a warrior now." Heartstorm raised an eyebrow and exchanged and unbelieving look with Eelfrost.

"Well, there are only so many patrols you can do in a day. Do like one or two then you have the rest of the day off," said Heartstorm. "Come on, I'll go ask Reedpelt if we can go on a border patrol."

"To ThunderClan of course," said Eelfrost. "I want to see if they've stretched the border even more."

"They can't," pointed out Deerflame. "There's the river." Heartstorm trotted outside and searched for Reedpelt. He spotted Thornstar, talking to Stripedfur. He approached them.

"Good morning Thornstar," greeted Heartstorm, no longer feeling the spark of hate that Thornstar had chosen Wolfstep to mentor Hawkkit and not himself.

"Good morning Heartstorm, Deerflame, Eelfrost," addressed Thornstar. Eelfrost and Deerflame, who were lingering behind, stood forward.

"Could I lead a patrol to ThunderClan?" asked Heartstorm. Thornstar glanced at the fresh kill pile which only had a mouse and a bird.

"I'd prefer if you led a hunting patrol. I've already sent Reedpelt with a patrol to ThunderClan, they're getting braver. You've never led a hunting patrol, am I right?" Thornstar said. Heartstorm shrugged uncomfortably.

"No," he admitted.

"You've been a warrior for long enough. Yes, you can lead a hunting patrol," said Thornstar. "Now would be a good time as well. The elders haven't even been fed yet."

"That should be the apprentice's jobs," said Heartstorm sourly.

"Yes," nodded Thornstar. "Indeed." He then turned back to Stripedfur. Heartstorm swivelled around and marched away with Eelfrost and Deerflame. He felt a twinge of annoyance at Thornstar.

"So we're going on a hunting patrol?" said Eelfrost.

"I guess," muttered Heartstorm. "We need to find someone else. We usually go by four."

"How about Sparkbelly?" asked Deerflame. "Since he's your *friend*."

"He is," exclaimed Heartstorm. "And yeah, I'll ask him." He looked around and spotted Sparkbelly at the entrance, eyeing another cat. He approached Sparkbelly.

"Hey, Heartstorm," said Sparkbelly distractedly.

"Do you want to come on a hunting patrol with me?" asked Heartstorm. "And Deerflame and Eelfrost." Sparkbelly didn't answer. Heartstorm turned to see Silverdrop slipping past him. He smiled at her and she smiled back, her eyes sparkling. Sparkbelly brushed Heartstorm.

"Where you going?" asked Sparkbelly. Silverdrop raised an eyebrow and shrugged. She padded away. "What's with her?" Heartstorm shrugged.

"So do you want to come or not?" asked Heartstorm.

"Sure," muttered Sparkbelly. "When are we going?"

"Now," said Heartstorm. He beckoned Deerflame and Eelfrost over and they all made their way out of camp. Heartstorm led them deeper into the forest. The sun broke through the trees and warmed Heartstorm's pelt. The air was fresh and birds chirped. Heartstorm felt refreshed. Sparkbelly got on along with Eelfrost well. He seemed slightly amused by Deerflame.

"Moorpelt is a grumpy old cat," said Sparkbelly. Eelfrost laughed.

"I know, I wonder what Rosepaw, Dustpaw and Hawkpaw think about having a strict father," grinned Eelfrost.

"I've seen him with his kits," said Deerflame sourly. "And he's really nice to them." Sparkbelly, Eelfrost and Heartstorm joked all the way. Deerflame put in a few remarks and couldn't help but join into the laughter at a good joke Sparkbelly made. Heartstorm thought this was what it should be like everyday. Going on patrols, helping RiverClan but still having fun with his best friends. He just couldn't help but beam. They finally stopped and Heartstorm turned to the three cats.

"So who should we do this?" said Heartstorm thoughtfully.

"Maybe we should separate," suggested Deerflame.

"Right, good idea," said Heartstorm. "We'll meet up here in the afternoon. I'll go with Eelfrost and Deerflame you go with Sparkbelly." Heartstorm didn't know why he chose to group themselves like that but nobody complained. Heartstorm and Eelfrost padded away and headed for the river.

"Can we hunt in the trees?" asked Eelfrost.

"We're not birds," said Heartstorm.

"We're not dogs either," Eelfrost muttered.

"I've never seen a dog," said Heartstorm. Eelfrost's mouth dropped.

"No," he gasped disbelievingly.

"Yup," nodded Heartstorm. Eelfrost thought a moment.

"Me neither," Eelfrost admitted. They both burst into laughter. A few moments later, they had caught the scent of a mouse and went silent. Together, they stalked their prey. They separated and slowly, crept towards the foot of a tree. Heartstorm spotted a small tail which moved slightly and finally saw the whole mouse. It was nibbling on something and totally unaware of the danger. Heartstorm spotted Eelfrost out of the corner of his eye. He knew Eelfrost was in the right position to lead the mouse to

Heartstorm. Eelfrost flicked his tail to tell Heartstorm not to move. Heartstorm crouched and waited patiently. Eelfrost crept forward. He glanced at Heartstorm and Heartstorm knew Eelfrost was close enough. Heartstorm signalled with his tail to say he was ready. Eelfrost suddenly sprung forward and caught the mouse in his claws but it squeaked and wriggled out. Heartstorm pounced forward and sunk his claws into the mouse. He snapped its neck and grinned.

"Nice one," said Heartstorm. Eelfrost grinned back at him and they buried the mouse. They continued their hunt.

Heartstorm and Eelfrost returned to their meeting point in the afternoon, a sparrow, two mice and a vole clutched in their jaws. They spotted Deerflame and Sparkbelly making their way towards them. They each had a mouse in their jaws. Deerflame also had a vole and Sparkbelly had a sparrow.

"Nice catch," remarked Deerflame. They made their way back to camp, joking through their mouth full of prey. They entered camp and Heartstorm dropped the prey into the fresh-kill pile. It was now full and Heartstorm felt happy and proud that he had been the one to lead the patrol to fill RiverClan's fresh-kill pile.

"Good job guys," praised Heartstorm. Sparkbelly smiled and winked at Heartstorm then beckoned him to talk to him alone.

"Deerflame," whispered Sparkbelly. "She's your best friend, right?" Heartstorm, slightly confused, nodded.

"Yeah, she is," nodded Heartstorm.

"She's kinda nice and smart, y'know," said Sparkbelly nervously.

"She is," nodded Heartstorm once more.

"So do you think you can find out what she thinks about me?" asked Sparkbelly.

"Well, I don't know. She doesn't really know you,

does she? Why don't you ask her yourself?" Heartstorm said. Sparkbelly looked mortified.

"See the thing is, I used to er, fancy Silverdrop. She's like pretty and all, but really rude and bossy. I mean, what's the problem with her? But now I know Deerflame and she's.. pretty cool," said Sparkbelly awkwardly.

"You liked Silverdrop?" gawped Heartstorm. And now Sparkbelly liked Deerflame? His best friend? He couldn't imagine them together. He couldn't imagine them as a family with little kits running about the nursery. He had never thought of Deerflame or Eelfrost having mates.

"Yes but not anymore," said Sparkbelly. "So do you think you could talk to Deerflame, for me?"

"I'll see what I can do," said Heartstorm, hoping Deerflame didn't like Sparkbelyl. "Right, then, see you." Sparkbelly nodded and ambled away. Heartstorm joined his two best friends.

"What was that about?" asked Eelfrost.

"Nothing," shrugged Heartstorm then he turned to Deerflame, hoping she didn't like Sparkbelly. He couldn't imagine both of them together. Sparkbelly was funny and nice but he wasn't the brightest and Deerflame was smart and funny and kind and his best friend. Plus Sparkbelly only just met her. They had never really talked before. Heartstorm realised he was feeling like this not because he liked Deerflame but because he was just feeling protective. He wanted Deerflame to have the best mate ever, not that he thought Sparkbelly was a bad cat.

"Do you er, fancy Sparkbelly?" asked Heartstorm straightforwardly. Deerflame burst into giggles but Eelfrost gave Heartstorm a mortified look and looked aghast. He was gaping.

"Of course not!" exclaimed Deerflame. Eelfrost and Heartstorm sighed in relief. "I mean, he's funny and goofy but he's like so... mouse brained." Eelfrost and Heartstorm burst into laughter.

"Who do you like?" asked Deerflame narrowing her eyes at Heartstorm. He stopped in his tracks. The question had taken him by surprise. He thought he would not be able to answer. He didn't know. But suddenly, he realised, he knew. He knew who he liked and was in love with. Someone who always made him smile. Someone he loved hanging out with alone. Someone he never wanted to let go.

"Silverdrop," breathed Heartstorm. Deerflame and Eelfrost watched Heartstorm in silence and amazement.

"You like Silverdrop?" exclaimed Eelfrost finally. "The bossy mysterious cat."

"Yeah," nodded Heartstorm. "I do."

"Well, I think Heartstorm can like who he wants. And Silverdrop seems nice," put in Deerflame.

"Says you," muttered Eelfrost. "She's so bossy."

"That's not a bad thing," objected Deerflame.

"Anyway, how do you like her? Do you even hang out with her?" questioned Eelfrost.

"I do, actually," said Heartstorm.

"Eelfrost, Heartstorm can like who he wants," said Deerflame sternly. Heartstorm was glad for Deerflame's strictness and firmness for once.

"Alright alright," relented Eelfrost. "Don't need to get all worked up. I was just worried for him, you see?" Deerflame rolled her eyes.

"Do you guys want to do some fighting?" asked Deerflame hopefully.

"Where?" asked Eelfrost.

"We could train a bit out of camp," suggested

Deerflame. Heartstorm nodded. He hadn't trained his fighting since.., well, since he was an apprentice.

"Sure," he said. As they walked back towards the exit, Heartstorm spotted Silverdrop and caught her eye. She nodded to him, as if to beckon him. He halted and hesitated.

"You guys go on," said Heartstorm. "I've got... something to do." Eelfrost spotted Silverdrop and winked at Heartstorm imploringly but Deerflame dragged him away. Heartstorm approached Silverdrop.

"Hey," smiled Heartstorm. Silverdrop smiled back, her eyes twinkling.

"Hey," she replied. Heartstorm felt as if he should ask something. He didn't know what though something was prodding his mind. Silverdrop had asked to see him at night for a walk. At night, just the two of them. Something clicked into place.

"Do you want to...., meet up tonight?" asked Heartstorm hopefully. "At the hill?" Silverdrop gave a small smile.

"Sure," she answered. Heartstorm grinned and practically bounced out of camp to Deerflame and Eelfrost.

Ch. 31

Heartstorm spotted the hill up ahead. The night air was cool and a warm breeze blew. Owls hooted and crickets chirped. Heartstorm closed his eyes and let the breeze ruffle his fur gentle. He spotted a shape sitting at the top of the hill and his heart fluttered. He sped up and climbed the hill swiftly. He joined the silver she-cat and beamed brightly at her. Silverdrop returned the smile. They sat next to each other, gazing down the hill, listening to the song of the night.

"Thanks for er..., coming," said Heartstorm finally and very awkwardly.

"I wouldn't miss it, for anything," replied Silverdrop. Heartstorm grinned happily then cleared his throat.

"I wouldn't have..., er, either," he agreed awkwardly. He punched himself inwardly. He was being so awkward, he needed to get a grip of himself.

"You're cute when you're nervous," said Silverdrop. Heartstorm didn't know whether to be happy or embarrassed. "Relax. You don't need to be nervous." Heartstorm frowned and tried to relax but his brain was reeling, trying to find a funny joke or something interesting to tell Silverdrop. Silverdrop noticed Heartstorm's look of concentration. She ran her tail softly down his back, sending shivers down his spine. But it was a warm feeling. Heartstorm found himself relaxing and without even thinking about it, he twirled his tail around Silverdrop's and slid closer to her. She leaned her head on his shoulder and he felt like he could stay like this forever. This was the best place to be.

"Each of those stars, is a warrior from StarClan," whispered Silverdrop, gazing at the shining night sky. Heartstorm looked at all the stars and thought about Brightheart.., then Stormpelt. He flinched at the thought of his father.

"My ma used to tell me that when she's gone, she'll still watch over me, from StarClan. She said she'd still be able to talk to me," continued Silverdrop softly. "But all I get are nightmares. And I never see her." Heartstorm frowned. Silverdrop had never talked about her family.

"But she's still watching over you," said Heartstorm. "From StarClan." Silverdrop shook her head sadly.

"She never comes to see me. Not even in my dreams...," said Silverdrop.

"That doesn't mean she's not up there, watching you. That doesn't mean she's not proud of you," Heartstorm said.

"But why doesn't she chose to see me?" whimpered Silverdrop. Heartstorm had never seen her look scared. He pressed himself closer to her.

"She promised you she'd watch over you from StarClan," said Heartstorm firmly. "Do you trust her?"

"Of course but..," Silverdrop trailed off.

"Then you must trust her enough to believe her. She's up there, watching us as we speak," said Heartstorm, gazing at the sky full of stars.

"Thanks," murmured Silverdrop. "Her name was Pebblespot." Silverdrop choked on her words. Heartstorm let her take some time to breath properly. "We were really close. I had two siblings. Goosekit, my brother and Spottedkit, my sister. We were even closer. It was my father's fault, T-t-hunders-spark. When they were gone..., Pebblespot got more protective. She didn't even let me near her new mate.., Goldenmist." Silverdrop lapsed into silence. Heartstorm didn't understand half of Silverdrop's story but he understood enough to know her childhood had been painful. He didn't dare ask questions. He knew it wasn't the right moment. She just needed his comfort. He gave her an affectionate lick on the cheek and leaned his head against hers. They rested this way, watching the world below. Feeling the grass dancing around them.

Listening to the crickets and owls.

"Brightheart died," Heartstorm said suddenly, "when I was born." Silverdrop looked up at him, her eyes brimmed with tears. "I never knew her. But I knew she was a great cat. And I loved her. Stormpelt took good care of me....., and even reluctantly, I've got to admit, so did Sandwing. She wasn't a mother, but she made sure I survived. Stormpelt was the best father I could have had. Him leaving, him dying, was the worst feeling I had in my life."

"You never seem sad," whispered Silverdrop. "You hide your sadness well."

"So do you," whispered Heartstorm. "But sometimes, you've got to let it out. And most of the time, I don't think about it. There's nothing worth being sad over. Not even Stormpelt anymore." Silverdrop nodded.

"Are you mad at him?" she asked Heartstorm. Heartstorm pondered. He was sad he had been betrayed. Sad that his own father, the one he had looked up to, loved, had turned his back on him. But he still had Brightheart and she was enough.

"Yes," admitted Heartstorm. "And sad and hurt. And hopeful. Hopeful that it might not be real, that he might still be the father he used to be to me. But being hopeful for something I know is real will just tear me apart more. There's no chance, between me and him."

"He is still the cat you knew," said Silverdrop suddenly. "But you just didn't know all of him. Sometimes, cats chose to hid a part of themselves." Heartstorm knew Silverdrop was thinking about another cat. He felt a twinge of jealousy.

"It was the same with Thunderspark," Silverdrop said, she spat out the name as if it was dirt and Heartstorm almost jumped with surprise. "I thought I knew all of him, I was wrong. I only knew one side of him." Heartstorm's jealousy evaporated on the spot. He wanted to ask more about Thunderspark but thought better not to.

"It's better not to dwell on the past," sighed Heartstorm. "And focus on the present."

"And the future," added Silverdrop. "But the present is nice too." Heartstorm smiled blissfully. He loved being there, just talking with Silverdrop. He didn't think about how it would be if Eelfrost or Deerflame had been with him, just being with Silverdrop was enough.

"Yeah, and appreciate what I've got..., right now," Heartstorm said. He had meant Silverdrop. Silverdrop didn't say anything. "I mean you." Silverdrop looked up at Heartstorm and smiled.

"I mean I don't know how you feel but everytime I see you," Heartstorm continued, feeling braver. "I want to smile. And just thinking about you makes my day better. And your eyes, your eyes are the most beautiful things I've seen in the world. It's like gazing into a beautiful swirl of warmth and kindness and happiness and of..., you." Silverdrop was silent. Heartstorm hoped he had said the right thing. Then she nuzzled closer to him which was enough of a reply. He cuddled closer to her. There was no better place in the world.

Ch. 32

"Hey!" exclaimed Deerflame, glaring angrily at Eelfrost and Heartstorm. Heartstorm tried to keep a straight face. "I saw that!"

"Saw what?" asked Eelfrost innocently.

"You stole my fish!" said Deerflame indignantly. She grabbed a fish from Eelfrost's pile and threw it back into her own. The three warriors were having a fishing competition to see who could catch the most fish. Deerflame had six fish, Eelfrost three and Heartstorm three.

"It was mine!" cried Eelfrost. "Right Heartstorm?" Heartstorm nodded seriously.

"You can't take his, it's cheating," he agreed. Deerflame growled angrily.

"It was mine!" she said frustratedly. "Don't make that face, both of you!" Heartstorm and Eelfrost burst into laughter but Deerflame couldn't help but smile.

"If you want to do it that way," she said then grabbed one of Heartstorm's fish. Heartstorm's eyes went wide and he leapt at her and they tumbled to the ground. He grabbed the fish with his teeth and tore it from her grasp. She bat at him with her paws. Eelfrost heaved himself in front of Deerflame and grabbed Heartstorm's fish, throwing it on his pile. The three friends erupted into an angry but fun battle of trying to steal each other's fish. In the end, twelve fish lay everywhere on the ground. Heartstorm collapsed on the ground, laughing. Eelfrost toppled beside Heartstorm grinning and laughing uncontrollably. Deerflame had also burst into laughter, finally letting out her funny side.

"Hey, guys," came a voice. Heartstorm turned and spotted Sparkbelly through tears of laughter.

"Yeah?" asked Deerflame, trying to calm herself but failing. She burst into more laughter.

"Wow, that's a lot of fish," said Sparkbelly looking around. "When you bring it back to camp.., er Eelfrost, be careful..." Eelfrost had almost rolled into the river. His eyes went wide and he scrambled back up the bank. Heartstorm and Deerflame stopped to watch him for a while then a fit of laughter caught them once more. "Well er, when you bring the fish back Reedpelt's leading a border patrol to ThunderClan and we need three more cats. They're getting more..., pushy... Thornstar wants at least five cats per patrol." Sparkbelly waited, not knowing whether the three laughing warriors had heard him. Finally, Heartstorm calmed down enough and took three big breaths before nodding to Sparkbelly. When the laughter had finally died down, they each grabbed four silver fish in their mouths, and unable to talk, padded back to camp. They slipped under the tunnel and dropped their fish into the fresh-kill pile.

"I caught the most fish, so I get to give you both a dare," declared Deerflame once she was able to talk again. Heartstorm and Eelfrost groaned. "Hey! I haven't even told you what it is yet."

"Probably to feed the elders," muttered Eelfrost under his breath. Deerflame was not very original with her dares and Heartstorm agreed.

"I dare Heartstorm to ask Silverdrop if they can be mates," said Deerflame. Heartstorm's jaw dropped and Eelfrost's eyes went wide. He was caught between wanting to laugh and astonishment.

"I'm not- I can't- I- I.. I," stammered Heartstorm in protest. Deerflame smirked.

"What were you saying about me having no imagination?" she asked.

"That's not- no," Heartstorm gaped. "You can't make me do that."

"It's my dare," replied Deerflame firmly. Eelfrost cast Heartstorm an apologetic look and gave Deerflame a look of apprehension. He hoped he wouldn't get a dare as bad as Heartstorm's. "Plus, you and Silverdrop are already practically mates." Heartstorm opened his mouth to protest but Deerflame clicked her tongue.

"And Eelfrost, your dare is to offer Floodwhisker a half eaten mouse," grinned Deerflame. Eelfrost's eyes popped and Heartstorm felt slightly bad for Eelfrost but he still thought his dare worst. What would Silverdrop say? She had showed him that she liked him... But she had never mentioned anything about being mates. It could go terribly wrong and in that case, he would be able to tell her it was a dare, or it could go right... and Heartstorm couldn't think of how happy he would be if it did go right.

"Floodwhisker!" exclaimed Eelfrost. "B-b-but..."

"Wait, that's not all. You need to go in the stream, swim a little and all wet you need to take the mouse, bring it to Floodwhisker, dance around him, showering him with water then offering him the half eaten mouse," said Deerflame proudly. Eelfrost groaned and threw his head back.

"He's going to murder me in my sleep," groaned Eelfrost. "Please don't make me do this."

"You lost, fair and square," replied Deerflame indifferently

"Give me one like Heartstorm's," begged Eelfrost. Deerflame shook her head resolutely. Eelfrost huffed angrily and sulked as they made their way towards Sparkbelly and Reedpelt. Reedpelt smiled his greeting to the three warriors and nuzzled Deerflame lovingly.

"How was your day?" he asked her. She smiled happily, eyeing Heartstorm and Eelfrost.

"Great," she beamed. Heartstorm and Eelfrost skulked behind the patrol, both thinking about their dares and

regretting ever playing the game. Heartstorm was so lost in his thoughts when the strong smell of ThunderClan hit his nose, he took a double take. He stumbled back and his eyes went wide. They were still well in the forest.

"Their scent," exclaimed Heartstorm. "It's so strong!" Reedpelt nodded angrily.

"Yes, they've been getting more insistent with their border marking," growled Reedpelt. "Which is why we're doubling the patrols." They finally exited the cover of the trees and Heartstorm spotted the river overhead. They marked the border thoroughly and Heartstorm glanced every few moments to the other side of the river, expecting a ThunderClan warrior to appear soon.

"On almost each patrol we've had, we've met ThunderClan cats," explained Reedpelt, eyeing the other side of the river. "We're lucky they're not here today. Their taunts really are tiring." They checked their border once more, remarking it a few times and stalked back towards camp, talking badly about ThunderClan.

"They're all mouse brains," said Eelfrost. "They're stupid if they think they can come too close to RiverClan."

"Yeah, fox hearted ThunderClan!" growled Sparkbelly.

"They think they're so big and strong, but really, they're tiny little kits who cry for food and can't even fight," Deerflame said. Heartstorm remembered Cinderstar telling him never to underestimate the enemy. It seemed so long ago, like a dream, but somehow, he knew Cinderstar was right. Although she had just been a warrior at that time, she had been wise. He didn't know what had happened to her now but he knew that he would never underestimate his enemy. They reached camp and Deerflame nudged Eelfrost, urging him to do the dare now.

"It's not fair," complained Eelfrost as he watched Reedpelt and Sparkbelly pad away. "Why doesn't Heartstorm do it now?"

"Because he's doing it tomorrow," said Deerflame and glared at Heartstorm. "I'll make sure of it." Heartstorm shrugged. Eelfrost huffed and stormed to the stream.

"Who's eating half of the mouse?" he asked. Deerflame grinned and volunteered. While she went to get the mouse and eat it, Eelfrost soaked himself in the river. Heartstorm found himself watching with excitement and apprehension. Eelfrost saw his look of excitement and rolled his eyes.

"You could at least pretend to feel bad for me," he muttered as Deerflame returned with a half eaten mouse. She passed it to him lightly and beamed as he stalked towards the elder's den. They waited outside and Heartstorm and Deerflame hid. They peered from behind the bushes, hot with excitement. Pigeonfeather was sunning near the fresh-kill pile so only Floodwhisker was resting outside of the den. Eelfrost hesitated a few moments, looking ill and finally, he walked towards Floodwhisker. Heartstorm and Deerflame watched happily. Suddenly, Eelfrost burst into a happy little dance. Floodwhisker's eyes widened and he grumbled and snapped for Eelfrost to stop. Eelfrost though, continued dancing around Floodwhisker, spraying water all over. Floodwhisker growled and grumbled.

"What are you doing? You insolent cat!" snarled Floodwhisker. Eelfrost's eyes lit up and he coulnd't help but smile. Heartstorm and Deerflame kept in their laughter. Finally, Eelfrost, looking like he was having fun, passed Floodwhisker the mouse.

"Do you want it?" he grinned happily. "It was really good." Floodwhisker's eyes widened with horror.

"How dare you!" he roared. "Disrespecting your elders!" Floodwhisker grabbed the mouse in his mouse and threw it at Eelfrost. It hit him on the head and he stumbled back. Heartstorm and Deerflame backed away, laughing hard. Eelfrost joined them a moment later with Floodwhisker's shouts right behind them. They all scurried away, laughing hysterically.

"That wasn't really nice," panted Deerflame when they had caught their breath.

"It was your idea," pointed out Eelfrost.

"I know but I kinda feel bad now," sighed Deerflame. Heartstorm didn't, he found it had been the funniest thing he had seen in his life. Plus, they hadn't really harmed Floodwhisker in any way.

"Well, I change my mind," declared Eelfrost. "That was the best dare ever! Did you see his face!" The three of them turned to talking excitedly about Floodwhisker's reaction and putting in remarks about sort of regretting their actions but really, they had all enjoyed it.

Ch. 33

Heartstorm spotted Deerflame and Eelfrost, urging him on a little way behind. Heartstorm approached Silverdrop with a deep breath. He closed his eyes and when he opened them, he was staring back into her brilliant eyes. She smiled at him and flicked her tail at him.

"Hey," she smiled.

"Hi," said Heartstorm, seemingly mesmerised.

"Are you alright?" asked Silverdrop with a frown, seeing his face. Heartstorm's thoughts were reeling. He had to say it. And now that he was in front of her, he wanted to say it. But what if she rejected him. He couldn't lose her. Her soft eyes seemed to calm him down and soon, he was breathing normally and his heart wasn't racing as fast anymore. He took a deep breath.

"I just, er, wanted to ask you something," began Heartstorm. Silverdrop cocked her head.

"What is it?" she asked. Heartstorm took a step sideways, to the corner of the warrior's den where Deerflame and Eelfrost wouldn't be able to see him. If he was going to do it, he wasn't going to do it as a dare but because he wanted to.

"Do you want to be my mate?" asked Heartstorm finally. Silverdrop stared at him for a while, as if fighting to say something. His heart clenched. She was going to say no. She was going to turn him down. She was going to walk away. She gazed into his eyes and held his gaze.

"Are you serious?" she asked softly.

"Well yeah but er, I get it if you don't want to erm..," Heartstorm replied nervously. He looked down sadly. He

wanted to run away and hide. She was going to say no. But he really wanted to. He realised he was ready. He was ready to have a cat he loved so much he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. Have kits with. He had never felt like this before. He felt his stomach squirm, waiting for Silverdrop's answer. If she said no, he didn't know what he would do. He wanted his future to be with her.

"Yes," whispered Silverdrop finally. "I do. I want to be your mate." Heartstorm's heart fluttered and something seemed to click in place. He felt warmth spread through him. He reached out and nuzzled Silverdrop, feeling her soft fur against his face. Warm and comforting. He twirled his tail around hers, feeling her long and slender tail slip around his. She had said yes. Yes to spending the rest of her life with him. And he was ready. He had no regrets. He inhaled deeply, feeling extremely elated. He thought of Brightheart and imagined her proud face. *I'm proud of you Heartstorm*. Her voice rang out in his head and he was sure she was there, watching him with her bright and loving eyes. Nodding her head in approval.

"She said yes?" gasped Deerflame. Eelfrost's eyes almost popped out. Heartstorm nodded.

"Yeah, she did," he nodded.

"Wow, my best friend has a mate," Eelfrost said, bewildered. "I never thought you and Silverdrop would- I mean... Well, she is a bit ... *weird.* You know?" Heartstorm glared at Eelfrost. "I mean, weird is a good thing." Heartstorm rolled his eyes but smiled.

"Well, it's not big surprise really," said Deerflame calmly. "I mean, I knew it would happen eventually. I mean, with the way you look at each other and all." Deerflame acted wisely but Heartstorm could see how excited and happy she was, bursting to ask questions. He grinned, feeling just as happy and joyful. Suddenly, Beestripe, Cloudbreeze, Rainfeather and Hawkpaw staggered into the clearing. Heartstorm turned to see them. A strong stench of sweet blood filled the clearing and Heartstorm's heart lurched as he saw Beestripe, limping, long cuts down his face.

Rainfeather had blood gushing down one side of her face and her tail was bloody and almost bare of fur. Cloudbreeze had a deep gnash down his shoulder and looked around frantically while Hawkpaw collapsed on the ground. Hawkpaw's eyes were filled with dread, horror and fear. Cats ran to their help and Frogleap emerged from the medicine den, bounding up to the wounded cats. Hawkpaw was on the ground, moaning and Frogleap tended to him first. Heartstorm felt his feet go wobbly and he stumbled towards Hawkpaw.

"Get the others in my den!" Frogleapt was ordering. Thornstar and Reedpelt had appeared. They both helped bring the wounded cats to the den. Heartstorm tried to see Hawkpaw, to make sure he was all right. Dread flooded through him. What had happened? But he knew. It was ThunderClan. he smelt their stench all over the wounded cats. Thornstar looked up.

"Heartstorm! Deerflame! Eelfrost! Moorpelt! Acornheart! Reedpelt! And Smallear, get to ThunderClan border now!" Thornstar ordered. Heartstorm didn't think twice. He followed the other cats towards the tunnel and they raced towards the ThunderClan border, blood pumping through their veins.

Ch. 34

Wind whistled past Heartstorm and the strong smell of ThunderClan flared in his nostrils. He felt a burst of anger and hatred to them. For what they had done to his Clanmates..., for what they had done to an apprentice. Reedpelt signalled for them to slow down. Suddenly, a large ThunderClan cat burst through the bushes towards them. Heartstorm didn't think. He leapt onto his enemy, claws unsheathed. He dug his claws into the enemy's soft snout and started raking his hind legs onto the warrior's side. Blinded, the warrior staggered back. Reedpelt glared the warrior with disdain, not even telling Heartstorm off. He the lunged forward and clawed at the warior's face. The warrior howled and tried to claw back and tried to back away at the same time.

"Check for more ThunderClan warriors!" instructed Reedpelt, snarling ferociously at the ThunderClan warrior. He fled whimpering loudly. "Stay in pairs!" Heartstorm turned to see Acornheart and Smallear streaking away. He let Eelfrost and Deerflame go together and joined Moorpelt's side. Together, they made their way towards the river. The stench of fresh blood reached Heartstorm's nose. He spotted the tunnel, ThunderClan cats had forced their way through. His fur rose at the sight of it and he eyed his surroundings.

"They're still here," whispered Moorpelt suddenly. Heartstorm stiffened and listened. A fresh scent wafted up his nose.

"They're waiting," he growled under his breath. "In the tunnel." Moorpelt nodded.

"We can't take them on alone," he muttered. "Go get the others." Heartstorm refused. He wasn't leaving. Moorpelt growled.

"I'm the senior warrior here, you'll do as I say," he said firmly and Heartstorm retreated. He raced away and spotted Acornheart, Smallear and Reedpelt. He halted in front of them.

"They're in the tunnel, waiting!" informed Heartstorm. Reedpelt growled and turned to Smallear and Acornheart.

"Acornheart, go report to Thornstar and ask for reinforcements. Smallear, get Eelfrost and Deerflame," ordered Reedpelt and he followed Heartstorm towards the tunnel. The air was still as they approached it. They joined Moorpelt's side. The ThunderClan warrior's wouldn't be able to see them from the tunnel and Heartstorm felt shivers of rage and hatred run through him. They heard some rustling and turned to see Eelfrost and Deerflame followed by Smallear. They all waited together, breathing softly. Suddenly, they was movement at the tunnel. Heartstorm let out a small growl and seven ThunderClan warriors burst out of the tunnel. Heartstorm hissed and sprang towards them. He didn't have to worry about Reedpelt holding him back or objecting. Reedpelt was right behind him, growling and snarling angrily. Heartstorm headed for the first cat he saw, filled with anger. How dare they invade RiverClan? He pounced on the enemy, digging his claws deep into the warrior's shoulder. He smelt blood and bit into the warrior's ear. He tasted sweet and warm blood on his tongue and bit harder. The ThunderClan cat thrashed and lashed back at Heartstorm but he hardly felt it. Bitter anger and the lust to avenge his Clanmates filled Heartstorm and he continued to bite the warrior until he went still. Heartstorm pushed the warrior away, who stumbled back and collapsed to the ground. The ThunderClan warrior's ear was almost torn apart and blood was seeping into he's eye but Heartstorm didn't care. He looked around and saw his Clanmates, battling against the cats. A few more ThunderClan warriors had joined, including the deputy. Heartstorm was about to hurtle at Waspnose (the ThunderClan deputy) but a cat wrestled him to the ground. The breath was knocked out of Heartstorm and he felt sharp claws pierce his shoulder. Something bit into the back of his neck and he lashed out angrily. He rolled over his attacker, a light brown tabby she-cat and slashed at her face. He knew that would cause the most damage. She wriggled away from him, blood pouring down a nasty gnash above her eye. Heartstorm felt a swell of smugness and happiness knowing he had caused it. She snarled at him and sprang at him, claws unsheathed. Heartstorm dodged just in time and caught her back leg. She stumbled but quickly regained balance before Heartstorm could do more damage. She

lunged at his tail and caught it between her teeth. Heartstorm felt pain flare through him but didn't pay attention to it. He started to claw at her side and she tugged at his tail hard. Then another weight bashed into Heartstorm. He was pushed the ground and he felt the world blur around him. Another cat was attacking him. He clawed and bit hard, not knowing what was happening. The two ThunderClan cats worked together and all Heartstorm could do was writhe and growl, lashing out blindly. Suddenly, the weight was lift off him and Heartstorm took a deep fresh breath. Eelfrost, accompanied by Smoketail, had joined him. Smoketail ran back into the brawl but Eelfrost stayed back to help Heartstorm up. Thornstar had brought reinforcements. Now RiverClan was not outnumbered, ThunderClan was.

"Let's get revenge," hissed Heartstorm and Eelfrost nodded in agreement. Heartstorm flung himself back into the battle and spotted Blacktail, having trouble with a large black she-cat. Heartstorm tackled the she-cat over and bit into her snout. Blood swelled around her snout and her eyes clouded with fear. She couldn't open her mouth but only lashed out her claws. Blacktail clawed at her side and finally, Heartstorm let go. The black she-cat stumbled back, whimpering and shooting withering looks to Heartstorm.

"Make sure she gets out of our territory and stays out," Blacktail growled. Heartstorm nodded numbly and took the black she-cat by the scruff. He dug his teeth in hard, drawing blood to make sure ThunderClan never forgot their mistake of attacking RiverClan. He dragged her over sharp rocks and flung her under the tunnel. He heard some frantic scraping and spotted her fleeing from the other side of the river. Heartstorm watched with glee then turned back to the battle. The few ThunderClan warriors left were struggling and starting to back away. A white cat fled towards the tunnel with only a few scratches. Heartstorm thought he deserved more and lunged for the cat. The white cat struggled, giving Heartstorm a few hard blows to the head but Heartstorm managed to inflict a few more scratches and a bite to the cat before he slipped away. Finally, RiverClan was free of invading ThunderClan warriors. Heartstorm turned to see his Clanmates, panting, drenched in sweat and dripping in blood. Reedpelt, with a few

nasty gashes to his side, shouted for anyone not too badly wounded to help the more wounded. Suddenly, Heartstorm spotted Silverdrop. He felt himself lighten up. She rushed to his side. She had a small scratch on her face and a few bites on her tail but otherwise looked fine. Heartstorm took a step towards her, looking worried.

"Hey, are you ok?" he asked worriedly.

"You're worse," Silverdrop replied. She let him lean on her and they made their way slowly back to camp alongside their other Clanmates. Finally, they reached camp where Frogleap was shouting out instructions and tending to the most badly wounded. He had gotten Rosepaw and Dustpaw to help give out cobwebs and poultices. Frogleap spotted Heartstorm and ordered him to the medicine den straight away. Heartstorm, too tired to object, limped to the medicine den, only now feeling tiredness spread through his body. He felt his muscles ache and his scratches, bites and wounds burning and searing with pain. Hawkpaw and Beestripe were in the medicine den. Hawkpaw was patched up but seemed to be in shock, staring into nothingness. Silverdrop helped Heartstorm to a nest and he collapsed. Frogleap bustled in and tended to Heartstorm immediately before barking orders to Rosepaw to pass Silverdrop a cobweb for one of her worst bites. Frogleap tended to Heartstorm who seemed to be in a haze and ordered him to stay and rest in the nest. Heartstorm didn't object. He rested his head in his paws and let his breathing slow. He hoped Hawkpaw would be alright. But soon, a wave of exhaustion hit Heartstorm and he felt himself sinking into dreams.

Ch. 35

Heartstorm woke up feeling slightly dazed. He looked around, adjusting to his environment. A light snoring could be heard on his right. Hawkpaw, Beestripe and Smoketail were resting in different nests. Heartstorm thought Hawkpaw looked smaller and weaker somehow. Heartstorm slowly struggled to get up. Suddenly, Frogleap padded into the den.

"Hey!" he barked angrily. "Get back into the nest!" Heartstorm sighed.

"I'm fine," he assured Frogleap. Frogleap rolled his eyes.

"Who's the medicine cat here?" asked Frogleap sharply. "Now get back into the nest and don't move." Heartstorm slumped back into the nest. He wanted to know if ThunderClan had stayed in their territory. He wanted to know if Deerflame and Eelfrost.. but mostly Silverdrop were alright. He wanted to ask so many questions.

"I know you'll have questions," said Frogleap. "But you need rest for now."

"How long do I have to stay here?" asked Heartstorm sourly.

"You don't seem too happy," grunted Frogleap. "Only for today."

"How about Hawkpaw?" asked Heartstorm.

"Longer," sighed Frogleap narrowing his eyes. "Perhaps half a moon. But that's only for physical recovery, mentally and physiologically, it might take longer. I mean, seeing his mentor killed in front of his own eyes..." Heartstorm's eyes widened and he pricked his ears, unable to believe and process what he had just heard.

"What do you mean?" croaked Heartstorm hoarsely. Frogleap sighed.

"Oh I'm sorry, I forgot, you don't know," he shook his head softly. "Wolfstep...., he's dead." Heartstorm couldn't believe his ears. The kind, wise warrior, dead? It couldn't be?

"Wolfstep?" repeated Heartstorm softly.

"Yes, he's gone to StarClan now," Frogleap nodded sadly. Beestripe grunted and moved in his nest. "Shh, be quiet now. Rest." Heartstorm couldn't rest! One of his Clanmates was dead. Wolfstep was dead... He let his head fall into his paws and his thoughts drift into sadness and mourning. Just then, Reedpelt entered the den. He padded quietly to Frogleap's side.

"Are they alright?" asked Reedpelt worriedly.

"They should all recover soon. I'm more worried about Hawkpaw. You know, seeing Wolfstep dying...," sighed Frogleap, casting a glance at Hawkpaw's small body.

"Wolfstep...," repeated Reedpelt softly. "He'll have good hunting in StarClan." Reedpelt seemed to sob silently to himself but quickly recollected himself. "And Heartstorm?"

"I told him..., by accident," huffed Frogleap.

"So he'll want an explanation," Reedpelt concluded. "When he's better."

"Yes," agreed Frogleap. "Wolfstep's death is a great loss." Reedpelt padded out silently. Heartstorm let himself fall into his thoughts bubbling around in his mind, not concentrating on anything.

Ch. 36

"They were on patrol," explained Thornstar. Heartstorm was sitting up in his nest, listening intently and sadly. He had argued with Frogleap until he had fetched Thornstar for an explanation. Heartstorm hadn't fully accepted the death of his Clanmate. It had to be all a big nightmare. "ThunderClan thought they deserved more land and invaded. Of course, the patrol had to attack. One of the warriors was beating Hawkpaw up badly so Wolfstep jumped in front and knocked Hawkpaw aside just as he was about to fall into the river. They fought, dangerously close to the river. Hawkpaw was now fighting with another ThunderClan warrior and had fallen, lying injured on the ground beside the river. Wolfstep ran to his side to help him but two warriors attacked him. He was battered up badly...., he fought back, trying to protect Hawkpaw but he was pushed into the river.... He drowned." Heartstorm's heart was racing.

"H-how could have drowned?" cried Heartstorm. "He knows how to swim!"

"He was too badly injured...," whispered Thornstar. "And the current was strong. He might have also hit a rock and gone unconscious when he fell.. After that, our patrol managed to get a few cats back to their border and fled back to camp. You know what happened after.." Heartstorm and Thornstar lapsed into silence.

"I understand your sadness which is why I wanted to tell you when you got better," Thornstar said.

"I'm better," said Heartstorm. "I don't need to stay here another night." Frogleap approached them.

"Hey, I'm the medicine cat here," he snapped.

"Did ThunderClan cross the border again?" asked Heartstorm sadly.

"No," reported Thornstar. "They kept at bay. Many were badly injured, they will not be trying to invade for a long time."

"So Wolfstep died a hero," Heartstorm said. Thornstar nodded.

"You've been through this kind of sadness before," Thornstar said. Heartstorm didn't answer. It was like feeling the loss of Stormpelt again. They had not been too close..., but they were Clanmates, family. "Hawkpaw is having to deal with a lot right now. You've been through this, maybe you could help him." Heartstorm nodded and glanced at Hawkpaw's unmoving body. He had been resting or just not moving for as long as Heartstorm cold remember.

"Right, you need your rest," Thornstar said and turned tail. He exited the medicine den. Heartstorm collapsed in his nest, thinking of the cruel ThunderClan cats who had thought territory was more important than a cat's life. He closed his eyes and felt a wave of sadness wash over him. Then anger. What kind of cat would do that? Heartstorm trembled with hatred. Another cat brushed into the medicine den. Heartstorm was swept by a sweet smell and opened his eyes. A cat slipped beside Heartstorm. Silverdrop.

"How are you feeling?" she frowned.

"Good. Great," Heartstorm replied. He was so glad to see her. He made sure she had no injuries.

"You don't seem too great," she said, her eyes sad.

"Yeah, it's just, Wolfstep, you know?" Heartstorm said nervously. But as Silverdrop gazed at him in understanding, he felt as if he could pour out her heart to her.

"I know," she nodded.

"It's a bit like Stormpelt's death. It felt more overwhelming then..., but I learned to live with it," Heartstorm

whispered, he couldn't help it, he needed to talk to someone. Silverdrop listened without a word. "And it's not as important now...., with him disowning me and all. But I just feel like..." Guilt engulfed Heartstorm. "Wolfstep died thinking I was jealous or mad at him because he was chosen to be Hawkpaw's mentor not me."

"You're sad because of that?" exclaimed Silverdrop and shook her head. "He knew you weren't mad at him. He understood you felt slightly bitter at first. But he never thought you hated him. Never."

"You can't know that," whispered Heartstorm.

"But I did know," said Silverdrop forcefully. "Why do you think he asked to join your patrol? I know him... And he was not mad at you. Don't feel guilty." Heartstorm looked away. Emotions were starting to bubble out.

"I just...," Heartstorm trailed off. Silverdrop nuzzled him lovingly. A warm and calming feeling crept over Heartstorm. It would be alright. He closed his eyes and rested his head on Silverdrop.

Ch. 37

Heartstorm smelt the light scent of WindClan and heard the rushing water.

"You alright?" Eelfrost peered at Heartstorm. Heartstorm broke out of his thoughts.

"Yeah yeah," he assured Eelfrost. Eelfrost shrugged. "You don't seem right."

"It's nothing, just got distracted," Heartstorm forced a smile. Eelfrost turned to Greyspeck and Softcry.

"I'm the leader of this patrol," he announced proudly and for the tenth time. "So I say, Softcry, you go mark that way. Greyspeck, check for WindClan cats. I'll mark this part and Heartstorm you too." Softcry rolled her eyes at her son but padded away. Eelfrost turned to Heartstorm with a grin.

"It's so fun bossing everyone around," he grinned. "I understand why Silverdrop does it." Heartstorm didn't appreciate Eelfrost making fun of Silverdrop but couldn't help but smile slightly. They reached the river bank, gazing at the other side where the moor stretched out. They marked the border quickly.

"You're not talking much," Eelfrost pointed out.

"Yeah, it's nothing," Heartstorm said.

"Is it about Wolfstep?" asked Eelfrost more softly. "I know.... he was a great warrior. But..., he wouldn't want you to be sad. You've got to brighten up..., be the warrior RiverClan needs you to be." Heartstorm couldn't help but feel a little sense in what his best friend was telling him.

"You know Eelfrost, I think, for the first time, you're actually right," Heartstorm said. Eelfrost made a face, slightly hurt

but grinned.

"Thanks," he said, flicking his tail.

"Since when are you all intelligent and wise?" teased Heartstorm. But Eelfrost took him seriously. He bend over and looked around. He lowered his voice.

"I think Deerflame will like me better this way," admitted Eelfrost. "She doesn't really like jokers." Heartstorm rolled his eyes and laughed. He knew there was something going on between Deerflame and Eelfrost and found it quite funny how each came to talk to him about the other.

"Really?" Heartstorm raised his eyebrows. "I think she likes you just as you are."

"But she's all into rules and stuff! I'm not really. From now on, I'm going to be more mature," Eelfrost stated with a frown. Heartstorm snorted.

"As if," he rolled his eyes. Softcry and Greyspeck joined them.

"No sign of WindClan," said Greyspeck. Heartstorm was glad WindClan wasn't giving them trouble either. They made their way back to camp, a cold wind blew. Heartstorm shivered. He had been getting used to the warm weather, taking it for granted. But it would be leaf-fall soon. Heartstorm didn't want to think about the cold. They slipped into camp and Eelfrost headed straight to report to Reedpelt or Thornstar. Heartstorm headed for the medicine den to visit Hawkpaw. He had been visiting Hawkpaw daily. Hawkpaw still had a quarter moon in the medicine den. Frogleap had suggested a bit of rest even after going out of the medicine den with his parents. When Heartstorm entered the den, it was crowded. Hawkpaw's whole family crouched beside his nest. Stripedfur was watching her son sadly and worriedly, her tail twitching slightly. Moorpelt looked sadder and more scared than Heartstorm had ever seen him. Rosepaw and Dustpaw were peering at Hawkpaw cautiously. Stripedfur turned to see Heartstorm. She gave him a weak smile. Moorpelt moved aside so Heartstorm could

squeeze in and watch Hawkpaw. He felt slightly awkward.

"He'll be out in a quarter moon," said Stripedfur softly. "And he'll go back to being a normal apprentice."

"Yeah," piped in Dustpaw. "Like me and Rosepaw." Heartstorm gazed at the two apprentices with their eyes full of hope.

"You both won't expect him to act like he normally does," said Stripedfur said firmly. "He'll need time to adjust." Moorpelt swallowed then turned to Heartstorm.

"I expect you'll be chosen to be his mentor now," he said. Heartstorm didn't know if this was good or bad to Moorpelt and shuffled on his feet uncomfortably. "I hope you will be." Heartstorm's heart lightened.

"Yes, you've been through this and... you'd be a good mentor," agreed Stripedfur.

"You'll teach our son well," nodded Moorpelt. Rosepaw and Dustpaw were getting restless and Dustpaw stumbled to one side as he scurried across the medicine den, knocking some herbs making them fall silently around him.

"Dustpaw, pick it up," said Moorpelt sternly. Dustpaw quickly picked everything up and put it back into a neat pile. "Both of you, go out." Rosepaw and Dustpaw retreated out of the den. Suddenly, Hawkpaw moved and slowly, got up. Moorpelt and Stripedfur's eyes lit up.

"Hey Hawkpaw!" called Stripedfur gently.

"It's us," Moorpelt said soothingly. Heartstorm watched intently. Slowly, Hawkpaw opened his eyes and yawned. He stared at his parents and gave them a small smile. Stripedfur stepped forward and purred, nuzzling him warmly. He licked her cheek in affection. Moorpelt joined the family reunion. Heartstorm felt slightly awkward. Hawkpaw turned to see him and smiled.

"Morning," he said.

"Hey Hawkpaw," beamed Heartstorm. Most of the time Heartstorm had visited, Hawkpaw had been asleep or mumbling incomprehensibly.

"How are you feeling?" asked Stripedfur softly.

"Ok," answered Hawkpaw with a sigh.

"Your wounds are healing," noted Moorpelt. "You should be back up in a quarter moon. Do you miss your apprentice duties?" Hawkpaw cringed and his eyes clouded as the memories came flooding back. He collapsed in his nest, murmuring sadly.

"No no no," he was muttering. "No. Wolfstep. Don't go. Wolfstep?" Heartstorm's heart broke. He blinked back tears. Stripedfur gave a small cry. Moorpelt stepped forward and licker his son on the forehead.

"Hawkpaw, it's alright. It's just us," Moorpelt whispered gently. "It's Moorpelt, Stripedfur and Hawkpaw." Hawkpaw stopped shaking and slowly lay still. He looked up at Moorpelt and Stripedfur but wasn't really focusing on them.

"Is Wolfstep really dead?" he murmured.

"Yes Hawkpaw...," said Stripedfur painfully. "But it's going to be alright. He's with StarClan now."

"It's my fault!" burst out Hawkpaw.

"Hawkpaw! It's not your fault," Moorpelt assured.

"Hawkpaw," Heartstorm put in. "Hawkpaw, listen to me." Hawkpaw stopped sobbing and slowly lifted his eyes to Heartstorm. "It feels terrible doesn't it? Knowing you're never going to see him again. Knowing he died and you were there. You could have done something... should've done something. I need you to think about him. Think about Wolfstep." Hawkpaw's eyes were wide with horror and sadness. "Think about him Hawkpaw. Are you

thinking about him?" Hawkpaw gave a small nod. "Remember him. The happy times you've had together. It wasn't your fault. What happened to him wasn't your fault. Now, you remember him, now that you're thinking of him, ask yourself, would he want you to be sad? Would he want you to hide forever, blaming yourself?" Hawkpaw was still. Heartstorm's thought flickered to Briarkit. He should've saved her. He choked back the emotions threatening to flood out.

"Would he want that?" asked Heartstorm more forcefully. Hawkpaw shook his head. "He'd want you to make him proud. He'd want you to be the best apprentice you could and then become the best warrior you can so he can be proud. Do you agree that that is what he'd want?" Hawkpaw hesitated but nodded. "So are you going to do it? Are you going to make him proud?" Hawkpaw didn't move.

"I can't- I- I," stammered Hawkpaw.

"Are you going to dishonour Wolfstep?" frowned Heartstorm fiercely. Hawkpaw's eyes widened and he shook his head. "Then you must honour him by making him proud. By being the best apprentice of RiverClan you can. The best cat you can be. Understood?" Hawkpaw nodded.

"Yeah, I understand," nodded Hawkpaw. Moorpelt glanced at Stripedfur and she shrugged. "When am I out?"

"In a quarter moon, dear," replied Stripedfur. Moorpelt was looking at Heartstorm with a weird look but it was not anger.

"I'm going to make Wolfstep proud. Who's my new mentor? If I can't go out then I'll learn things in here," said Hawkpaw fiercely. Stripedfur seemed touched by this and Moorpelt was beaming with pride. Just then, Frogleap bustled into the den and frowned.

"Three cats!" he exclaimed. "Shoo get out! The air is getting so stuffy and hot! Didn't I say no more than two visitors?" Moorpelt rolled his eyes.

"Right right, we're going," Moorpelt huffed. Stripedfur smiled and nuzzled Hawkpaw before padding to the exit. Moorpelt gave Hawkpaw a small lick whispered "I love you" in his ear then followed Stripedfur. Heartstorm stayed to watch Hawkpaw with pride, hoping he would be able to mentor this young cat. Somehow, he knew Hawkpaw was destined for great things. He knew Hawkpaw was strong. He knew Hawkpaw had a good heart. He knew Hawkpaw would become a warrior. And he wanted to be the one who helped him.

"Will you be my mentor?" asked Hawkpaw hopefully. Frogleap was casting them looks of disapproval.

"Will you get out, already?" he huffed. "You've been in here long enough. Oof, it stinks. And my herbs are all messed up! They weren't like this before!" Heartstorm held back laughter and Hawkpaw let out a small giggle. Frogleap let out a small grunt.

"Maybe," Heartstorm replied to Hawkpaw. "Maybe..." He turned, said goodbye to Hawkpaw and an impatient Frogleap and padded out into the bright sun, feeling considerably lighter.

Ch. 38

"Our loss of Wolfstep leaves Hawkpaw with no mentor," declared Thornstar. Cats bowed their heads in respect. A quarter moon had passed and Hawkpaw was on his feet once more, more determined than ever to make Wolfstep proud. Heartstorm stood near Hawkpaw, hoping he would be chosen this time. Stripedfur, Moorpelt and Hawkpaw all wanted him as mentor. Heartstorm spotted Acornheart's hopeful gaze.

"Heartstorm, you have had good training from Blacktail and you are ready to take on an apprentice. I hope you will pass on all you know to Hawkpaw," announced Thornstar. Heartstorm leapt to his paws with joy. He padded up to the High Rock and joined Hawkpaw and Thornstar. Hawkpaw grinned happily at Heartstorm. They touched noses. Heartstorm turned to the crowd of cats and they burst into cheers. Heartstorm leapt down with Hawkpaw behind him. He grinned happily. Eelfrost and Deerflame rushed to his side.

"This is great!" exclaimed Deerflame. "Good job!"

"Nice dude," grinned Eelfrost. Heartstorm could only smile. Moorpelt and Stripedfur approached them.

"Teach our son well," nodded Moorpelt looking proud.

"Thank you," smiled Stripedfur. Heartstorm finally managed to escape the crowd with Hawkpaw.

"You feeling good enough to swim?" asked Heartstorm. Hawkpaw's eyes widened.

"Yeah! Right now?" he exclaimed.

"Let's go then," Heartstorm nodded. Hawkpaw followed Heartstorm out, ranting on excitedly. Just then, Silverdrop

appeared, trotting to Heartstorm. She congratulated Hawkpaw and said she was glad he was better now.

"You're going to be a great mentor," whispered Silverdrop as she walked past Heartstorm. He smiled blissfully then shook himself and led Hawkpaw towards the river running through the middle of RiverClan.

"I wanna see what you've learned about swimming and fishing for now," Heartstorm said. "I know from Wolfstep and from what I saw when you were a kit, you're very good at it." Hawkpaw puffed out his chest proudly. They reached the river. The air was cool and the sun was partially covered by white fluffy clouds.

"It's not very warm today," noted Hawkpaw.

"You'll see, it's better swimming now than in leaf-bare or new-leaf," assured Heartstorm. Hawkpaw nodded, shivered and slipped into the water. He gasped. "You alright?" Hawkpaw nodded numbly.

"It's cold," he said.

"I know, keep swimming," Heartstorm said. He walked down the river bank, Hawkpaw swimming after him. Heartstorm noted the way he swum and kept giving Hawkpaw encouragement or ways to improve.

"Right, good job," Heartstorm said finally. "Come up and dry yourself." Hawkpaw gratefully hauled himself out of the water and shook himself. Water sprayed everywhere.

"Wow, that actually felt good," grinned Hawkpaw. "What are we going to do now?" Heartstorm looked up. The sky was darkening. It must be late in the afternoon now.

"You can't forget, you're an apprentice. You've got duties. Such as feeding the elders," Heartstorm said firmly. Hawkpaw groaned.

"Please?" He begged. "I was hurt. Rosepaw and

Dustpaw will hunt for them." Heartstorm knew he would have felt that way as an apprentice but he was Hawkpaw's mentor and he needed to teach Hawkpaw to be the best warrior he could.

"I know it's not the best thing but it's part of being a warrior. Think about it as helping your Clan. You can pretend to be a warrior hunting for your clan," Heartstorm said. "Now get on with hunting. I'll watch you and see what level you're at." Hawkpaw thought for a while then shrugged. He slipped away to find prey. Heartstorm followed quietly, keeping a good distance. If Hawkpaw was as good at hunting as swimming, he'd be very glad. He suddenly heard some rustling. He stopped, hoping Hawkpaw would hear it as well. Hawkpaw continued slipping quietly through the undergrowth though. Heartstorm grit his teeth and followed. There was some rustling once again and Heartstorm really hoped Hawkpaw would hear that or they'd have problems! He watched as Hawkpaw continued to make his way forward. Heartstorm wanted to sigh out loud but suddenly, Hawkpaw stopped moving and tweaked his ear. Heartstorm watched intently, hoping Hawkpaw had heard the rustling. To Heartstorm's relief, Hawkpaw started to inch forward to a bush where the rustling had come from. Hawkpaw sniffed the air and Heartstorm did as well. Heartstorm smelt birds and the faint scent of... mouse. Hawkpaw peered at the bush. There was no more noise. Then suddenly, the mouse shot out of the bush and past Hawkpaw. Hawkpaw stared in dismay and surprise. The small mouse shot away and disappeared quickly. Heartstorm, watching from behind a few trees bit his tongue. He continued following Hawkpaw. A bird cawed and fluttered down to the ground. Heartstorm pricked his ears, aching to catch the bird. But Hawkpaw had spotted the bird as well and had stopped. Heartstorm saw Hawkpaw tense and crouch. Slowly he crawled forward, total concentration on the bird. His face was twisted in a funny face, totally concentrated on the bird. Heartstorm thought how funny it was, just some time ago he had been an apprentice, concentrating on hunting, with no idea his mentor was watching a few paces back. Hawkpaw unsheathed his claws quietly. In a quick movement, Hawkpaw pounced. He sunk his paws into the bird. It squawked in panic and started flapping its wings. Heartstorm cringed. Hawkpaw was looking at the bird as if terrified. The bird cawed sadly. Then Hawkpaw let the bird go. It took off into the sky.

Heartstorm frowned and watched as Hawkpaw slumped to the ground sadly. Heartstorm stepped out and padded up behind Hawkpaw.

"What's wrong?" asked Heartstorm. Hawkpaw looked up and seemed even more distressed that Heartstorm was there.

"Did you see that?" asked Hawkpaw softly.

"What, you letting the bird go?" asked Heartstorm. Hawkpaw looked down and sighed. He gave a feeble nod. "What happened?"

"I don't know," moaned Hawkpaw. "Something's wrong with me." Heartstorm frowned.

"After the battle you mean?" Heartstorm asked.

"No," Hawkpaw said, slowly getting up. "I can't hunt. I've never been able to hunt."

"What do you mean?" asked Heartstorm.

"I don't know!" moaned Hakwpaw. "Everything's fine. I can hear the prey and I can creep up behind it and all easily but..." Heartstorm didn't agree and objected in his mind but nodded for Hawkpaw to continue. "When I actually catch it and all.... It's like... I don't know. Feeling the prey wriggle in my paws.... wanting to let me to let it go. It's not fair that I have to take its life."

"You don't like killing," Heartstorm summarised.

"Well..., yeah," Hawkpaw sighed. "Is there something wrong with me?" Heartstorm wanted to say yes but Hawkpaw wasn't Eelfrost or Deerflame whom he could laugh and joke with, Hawkpaw was his apprentice.

"No," Heartstorm said firmly. "There is nothing wrong with you. You know...." Heartstorm suddenly thought about fish and his first few times catching fish. "I didn't like hunting fish either. Not really because I had sympathy towards them but I just didn't like their bodies wriggling in my paws." Hawkpaw looked up

hopefully.

"B-but," Hawkpaw stammered.

"Look," cut in Heartstorm. "You said it yourself. You can't kill your *prey*. Not a mouse or a bird, *prey*. So you already know it's prey, meant to be hunted and eaten." Hawkaw nodded feebly. "If you don't catch food. If all of us wanted to save our prey's life, we would starve. Understand?" Hawkpaw nodded.

"But... I can't kill it...," whispered Hawkpaw.

"You said you understood," Heartstorm said firmly. "Now you must choose. Either you choose the prey, or your Clan. Everytime you kill prey, don't think of it as taking an animal's life but giving life to your Clan, RiverClan. Everytime you hunt something, you'll be saving your Clan, feeding your Clan." Hawkpaw thought then finally nodded.

"I get it!" he exclaimed. Heartstorm nodded and smiled.

"So are you going to chose the *prey* or your Clan?" Heartstorm asked, knowing the answer.

"My Clan of course!" exclaimed Hawkpaw. Heartstorm smiled and gave Hawkpaw a nod of approval.

"Then you can do this. I'll be watching you. I believe in you," encouraged Heartstorm. Even if Hawkpaw didn't think he could do it, Heartstorm was sure Hawkpaw could do it, he just needed a small push. "Did you tell Wolfstep about this?" Hawkpaw shrugged.

"We learned the hunting technique and all...," Heartstorm frowned. "But we never got down to actually hunting and killing. He said I was to feed the elders. But since I couldn't hunt..., Dustpaw hunted twice as much for me." Heartstorm nodded.

"Right then, let's begin, go on. You can do this," Heartstorm pushed. Hawkpaw nodded more determined and trotted

off. Heartstorm let him take the lead before sneaking after him. He saw Hawkpaw's tail disappear behind a tree. He trotted after him. Suddenly, there was a crunch as a branch was stepped on. Heartstorm froze and in front of him, so did Hawkpaw. Hawkpaw then crouched and sniffed the air, pricking his ears and kept his tail low. Heartstorm felt a burst of pride for his apprentice, looking so determined. They inched closer and Heartstorm smelt the faint smell of vole. The scent grew stronger and stronger, filling his nostrils, making his hunter instincts turn on. As Heartstorm passed a tree, he finally spotted what Hawkpaw had his eyes glued on. The vole was large and sniffing and nibbling on some leaves. Hawkpaw's eyes were set on the vole, cold and resolute. Hawkpaw's muscles bunched up and Heartstorm knew he was leaping. Hawkpaw leapt and caught the vole in his paws. Without even thinking, he bit into the vole's neck and it snapped with a small crack. Hawkpaw's eyes went wide and Heartstorm feared Hawkpaw would be distressed at what he had just done but instead, Hawkpaw dropped the vole and jumped up happily. He looked around crazily then spotted Heartstorm.

"I did it!" yelled Hawkpaw happily. Heartstorm grinned and joined Hawkpaw's happy celebration.

"You did great, I'm proud of you," Heartstorm said.

"Do you think Wolfstep would be proud of me?" asked Hawkpaw, calming down.

"Of course!" exclaimed Heartstorm. "It'll be sunset soon but I'll give you more time, see if you can catch something else then you can bring this food to the elders." Hawkpaw nodded enthusiastically.

Heartstorm and Hawkpaw returned to camp. From Hawkpaw's mouth hung a vole and a juicy mouse. He was grinning and puffing his chest out in pride. Rainfeather passed them and nodded to Hawkpaw in approval. Stripedfur trotted to them, her eyes lighting up as she saw Hawkpaw's catch.

"Wow!" she cried. "Good job Hawkpaw!" Hawkpaw beamed happily. Rosepaw trotted over as well with Dustpaw.

Dustpaw cocked his head but Rosepaw looked amazed.

"Nice," she said. Hawkpaw flicked his tail happily. Dustpaw was eyeing him suspiciously but then shrugged and turned away.

"Get some rest tonight," Heartstorm told Hawkpaw as he headed for the elder's den. "You did well today. Tomorrow, we'll start at sunrise." Heartstorm thought Hawkpaw truly deserved a good night's rest. Hawkpaw nodded enthusiastically. Heartstorm bid Hawkpaw goodnight and turned to his den. He slipped inside, feeling his stomach bubbling with happiness. He spotted Silverdrop who looked up from her nest and trotted to Heartstorm's side.

"How was your first day as a mentor?" she asked happily.

"Great," Heartstorm replied, thinking about everything that had happened that day. He felt extremely proud with Hawkpaw's progress.

"Not too tiring?" asked Silverdrop.

"No..., it's really nice. Like having a kit of me own..., you know?" Heartstorm said thoughtfully, staring into space. Silverdrop looked up at Heartstorm with her soft eyes.

"No. I've never had kits," she said amused. "But if I did, if it was a she-cat, I'd name her Bloomkit and it was a tom, I'd name him Bramblekit, depending on his colouring, or maybe Bumblekit. It's cute isn't it?" Heartstorm chuckled.

"You really like names which start with "B", don't you?" he teased. Silverdrop shrugged.

"Maybe," she said. "But I like you too, and your name starts with "H", doesn't it?"

Ch. 39

Heartstorm yawned and stretched. He gazed out of the warrior's den. The sky was slowly lightening. With another yawn, Heartstorm padded past sleeping warriors. He peeked out of the warrior's den. A cold breeze blew, making Heartstorm wish he could retreat back into the den and into his nest to sleep. With a sigh, he walked out. A few cats were gathering at the entrance, the dawn border patrol. Reedpelt nodded to Heartstorm as he passed.

"Morning," grunted Reedpelt.

"Morning," replied Heartstorm. He headed for the fresh-kill pile, his stomach grumbling. He picked a small sparrow and and settled down to eat it quietly. As he ate, the thought of Silverdrop. Just then, Eelfrost stumbled out of the warrior's den, looking ruffled. He spotted Heartstorm and padded towards Heartstorm, yawning and looking drowsy. He slumped to the ground next to Heartstorm.

"Morning," yawned Eelfrost. Heartstorm yawned as well. "Why you up so early?"

"Hawkpaw," explained Heartstorm in one word. "You?"

"Was supposed to go on the dawn patrol, but they're gone," Eelfrost said. "Should not have even agreed to go in the first place." Heartstorm couldn't help but laugh.

"Really?" he laughed.

"Yeah really," Eelfrost said seriously but found the funny side to it and started laughing as well. They both lapsed into silence and yawn. Heartstorm then spotted Hawkpaw slowly walking out of the apprentice den looking sleepy and drowsy. Eelfrost spotted Hawkpaw as well.

"Well good luck," Eelfrost said. "I'm sure glad I'm not a

mentor. I'm not ever waking up early again..."

"Hmm," tutted Heartstorm. "See ya."

"Bye," Eelfrost said as Heartstorm padded towards Hawkpaw. Before Heartstorm reached Hawkpaw, he shook himself. He felt more awake and smiled at Hawkpaw.

"Good morning," said Heartstorm brightly. Hawkpaw grunted.

"Morning," he mumbled. Heartstorm laughed, his eyes sparkling.

"What's wrong?" asked Heartstorm.

"Nothing," muttered Hawkpaw. "Why are mentors never tired? I mean, we don't need to start this early." Heartstorm only smiled. He had to agree with Hawkpaw.

"Come on," Heartstorm beckoned with his tail, heading towards the exit. "We've got lot of training today." Hawkpaw seemed more awake now and trotted beside Heartstorm.

"What are we going to do?" he asked.

"Fighting practise," said Heartstorm. He himself hadn't practised his fighting since he had been an apprentice but all the moves were clearing etched in his mind.

"Cool!" exclaimed Hawkpaw. Heartstorm led Hawkpaw towards a clearing. The sun had almost fully risen. A cool breeze blew and the birds sang cheerfully. They stopped at the clearing.

"Right," Heartstorm said. "Let's start of with a bit of running. Three laps." Hawkpaw looked like he was about to complain but then shrugged and started to run around the clearing. Heartstorm watched, noting how Hawkpaw was taking short strides and pushing hard and how he already seemed to be out of breath. Hawkpaw finished his three laps, panting hard.

"You're going to need to improve your stamina," noted Heartstorm. "You need to take longer strides and control your breathing." Hawkpaw nodded. "Right, rest for a minute. Then you're going to show me the moves you already know." Hawkpaw nodded once more, too tired to say anything. Heartstorm let Hawkpaw rest for a while then ordered him to his feet.

"Go on, show me the moves you already know. Tell me the name of the move then you can do it on me," Heartstorm said. Hawkpaw nodded and frowned thinking hard. Then he concentrated on Heartstorm.

"I'll do a front paw blow," said Hawkpaw. Heartstorm nodded and positioned himself. Hawkpaw crouched but not to low. Heartstorm watched as Hawkpaw leaned onto his hind legs and bunched up his muscles. Then in a swift movement, Hawkpaw brought his front paw down on Heartstorm's head. The blow was clean and hard. Heartstorm shook himself, feeling slightly disorientated. When he finally managed to shake the dizziness off, he was fully awake. His ears were pricked and his was ready to pounce at anything threatening.

"Good job," complimented Heartstorm. There was nothing Hawkpaw could improve with his front paw blow. It was very well executioner. Heartstorm was pleasantly surprised. So Hawkpaw knew how to fight.

"Thanks," beamed Hawkpaw.

"Alright, throw me more moves," Heartstorm urged. Hawkpaw nodded enthusiastically.

"Ooh, I'll do stay and bite," said Hawkpaw. Heartstorm recalled Blacktail teaching him the move a long time ago and Pinestar had taught it to him as well. Heartstorm pushed away the memory of the dead former ShadowClan leader.

"Go ahead," Heartstorm nodded. Heartstorm tensed his body and pushed with his muscles forward. Hawkpaw dodged lightly and Heartstorm twisted around, swiping his right paw out to trip Hawkpaw. Hawkpaw managed to jump over his outstretched

paw though and turn. Heartstorm leapt at him once again, shooting out his back leg. Hawkpaw's eyes went wide and he dived down just in time to avoid Heartstorm's attack. Swiftly, Hawkpaw twisted and bit into Heartstorm's shoulder, not too hard. Heartstorm couldn't help but smile. Hawkpaw was good at fighting. The moves he had shown so far were very well done, perfect even.

"Excellent," noted Heartstorm. Hawkpaw retreated, beaming proudly. "Got anymore moves?" Hawkpaw nodded excitedly.

"Front paw strike," informed Hawkpaw. Heartstorm nodded and Hawkpaw shook himself. Heartstorm got ready, eyes fixed on Hawkpaw. Then Hawkpaw stepped forward, put his weight on his hind legs and brought down his right paw onto Heartstorm's snout. The strike was sharp and strong. Then with his other paw, he hit Heartstorm on the snout and chest again and again. The blows kept coming, clean and sharp. Finally, Hawkpaw stopped. Heartstorm nodded approvingly. He felt slightly disorientated but happy that Hawkpaw was such a skilled fighter.

"That was perfect!" exclaimed Heartstorm. "What more moves do you know?" Hawkpaw looked sheepish.

"None," he sighed. "That's all." Heartstorm deflated slightly but still, all three moves had been very well done.

"That's ok then, did you learn any more moves though? Or started learning any?" asked Heartstorm. He tried to keep his thoughts away from Wolfstep.

"Yeah... , we sorta started the leap and hold," said Hawkpaw.

"Can you show it to me?" asked Heartstorm.

"well....," Hawkpaw hesitated. "It's just, it's not perfect yet. And I don't want to do it wrong. It'll be a bad habit." Heartstorm remembered how Hawkpaw had wanted to learn the right technique in swimming just when he was a kit and not just splash around in the water like Rosepaw and Dustpaw had.

"Alright, then I'll teach it to you," Heartstorm said. "Start of by crouching, eyes fixed on me." Hawkpaw did as he was told. "You're going to bunch up your muscles and spring to any side. My left or right. From there, you will jump onto my back and cling on. No hesitation or waiting. We'll start with that for now." Hawkpaw nodded. "Go on then." Hawkpaw concentrated, crouched, eyes fixed on Heartstorm, then sprung right. As he landed, he immediately leapt up once more onto Heartstorm's back. Heartstorm staggered back and rolled Hawkpaw gently off.

"Good job!" Heartstorm said. "Now, when you're leaping onto my back, your jump needs to be controlled. I felt you jumping slightly shakily. And when you do your first jump, do not look at the side you're going to jump or it'll be predictable." Hawkpaw nodded. This time, he crouched, eyeing Heartstorm's left side then leapt to his right, barely missing Heartstorm. He then leapt up onto Heartstorm's back once more.

"Now, you were so concentrated on looking the opposite direction you didn't even look where you were jumping and almost ploughed into me," Heartstorm said. "You are not to look left or right, just at me, and sometimes, you may glance to the opposite side you're going to jump to but when you jump, make sure you look at where you're going." Hawkpaw nodded furiously. They tried once more. This time, Hawkpaw stared straight at Heartstorm, glancing a few times left, then right. This made sure Heartstorm had no idea which side he would spring to. Finally, Hawkpaw leapt to the left and then sprung up onto Heartstorm's back.

"Better!" cried Heartstorm. They tried a few more times till Hawkpaw could do it jumping both sides.

"Now we're going to do this but you'll be starting from my side," Heartstorm said. "It'll be even easier. So let's say we are fighting, you dodge one of my blows, or I dodge yours and you find yourself staring at my side." Hawkpaw nodded and they positioned themselves. "Now, you are going to leap straight onto my back. It'll have to be a clean, well aimed jump but it is considerably easier than what you've just done. You'll have to twist slightly on your jump so you can land facing my head." Hawkpaw nodded. "Go

on then. Let's try it." Hawkpaw crouched, fixed his eyes on Heartstorm and leapt up slightly to his left. He landed on Heartstorm's back and clung on.

"Good job," Heartstorm said then ordered Hawkpaw back into the starting position. "See there, you need to put more weight on your back and bunch up your muscles. Yes that's right! Now practise the leap.... good job, that was better. Right, let's try it a few more times." They did it more times till Hawkpaw had mastered it.

"Let's take a break, shall we?" Heartstorm suggested.

"Ok," shrugged Hawkpaw who was keen to continue. "What are we going to learn after?"

"Don't worry yourself about that for now. Go for a hunt. It'll be your time to hunt for the elders and come back in the afternoon," Heartstorm said. Hawkpaw nodded and trotted away. Heartstorm watched his apprentice fondly.

Ch. 40

Hawkpaw leapt, paws extended straight at Heartstorm. Then just before landing, he twisted and sprung onto Heartstorm's back. Heartstorm was taken by surprise and buckled to the floor. Hawkpaw clawed at Heartstorm with sheathed claws. With a roll, Heartstorm flipped over and was now onto of Hawkpaw, clawing at him. Hawkpaw struggled and twisted and finally, managed to break free. He bunched up his muscles, balancing on his hind legs and started pelting Heartstorm with front paw blows. Heartstorm, slightly disorientated, stumbled back then quickly, reared up and brought down both his paws strongly onto Hawkpaw. Hawkpaw fell to the ground and groaned. Heartstorm let Hawkpaw get up and breathe a moment before lunging for Hawkpaw's tail. Hawkpaw wasn't ready and yelped then twisted around and bit Heartstorm on the shoulder. He tasted blood and withdrew quickly.

"Sorry!" exclaimed Hawkpaw, embarrassed. Heartstorm licked his small bite and shrugged.

"It's alright," he said. "You'll do great if I was a real enemy." Once he had licked all the drops of blood off and the bite was clean, he turned to Hawkpaw once more.

"You're improving very well, we just need to fix a few things while you fight then we can learn new moves tomorrow," Heartstorm said. Hawkpaw grinned happily. Heartstorm was proud to say Hawkpaw had improve immensely in the last quarter moon in terms of fighting.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Hawkpaw.

"We're going on a patrol to ThunderClan," announced Heartstorm. He hadn't brought Hawkpaw anywhere near ThunderClan after the battle and Wolfstep's death but he thought it was time Hawkpaw returned there. Hawkpaw seemed slightly scared but nodded nonetheless.

"They should be leaving soon, let's go," Heartstorm flicked his tail and they walked towards camp. They found Sparkbelly and Dustpaw waiting at the entrance. Sparkbelly smiled at Heartstorm and Hawkpaw and Dustpaw started talking. The group of four made their way towards ThunderClan border.

"How is it, being a mentor?" asked Sparkbelly.

"Great," said Heartstorm.

"I think Dustpaw is a great apprentice, he's learnt a lot," Sparkbelly bragged.

"Hawkpaw too. He's improving so much in fighting," Heartstorm told Sparkbelly. Dustpaw and Hawkpaw trotted ahead of them, playfully batting at each others ears and joking.

"One day do you want to do training together? They could do some training fights just to see how good they are," Sparkbelly said lightly but he seemed competitive. "Nothing competitive." Heartstorm nodded, it would be good for Hawkpaw to fight with someone his size since he'd been practising with Heartstorm all the time.

"And they can learn fishing in pairs," added Heartstorm. Sparkbelly shrugged.

"It's soon going to be leaf-fall, it'll be cold," Sparkbelly put in.

"Yes but they do need to learn fishing in pairs," urged Heartstorm.

"Yeah alright," huffed Sparkbelly. "But we should do that fighting training together soon." Heartstorm chuckled in amusement. Sparkbelly seemed very keen to prove Dustpaw was a great fighter. But Heartstorm knew Hawkpaw could beat Dustpaw. Heartstorm scented the faint smell of ThunderClan and Hawkpaw slowed down to pad beside Heartstorm.

"It's alright," Heartstorm said, seeing Hawkpaw's look. "They'll be staying on their side of the border this time." The broke

out of the shelter of the trees and the river rushed ahead of them. Sparkbelly ordered Dustpaw to mark the border and Heartstorm nodded for Hawkpaw to mark the border further along. Hawkpaw trotted along, looking slightly nervous at first but when there was no sign of ThunderClan, he seemed more relaxed.

"So when should we do that training?" pressed Sparkbelly.

"The day after tomorrow?" suggested Heartstorm, knowing Sparkbelly was very keen.

"How about tomorrow?" asked Sparkbelly.

"I already told Hawkpaw we'd be working on more fighting moves and improving a few other things," Heartstorm explained. Sparkbelly seemed to take this as a challenge.

"Right," he said sharply. "Then the day after tomorrow." His eyes narrowed. Heartstorm couldn't help but feel amused. It would only be a friendly training, there was no reason to be competitive.

"So how are you and Deerflame getting along?" teased Heartstorm. Sparkbelly seemed to forget that their apprentices were "competing" and stopped acting hostile.

"Well," Sparkbelly lowered his voice. "We haven't talk for a while... She's always with that cat - *Eelfrost*. Ugh, why does he always stick to her? Is there something going on between them? Could you talk to her for me?" Heartstorm knew there was indeed something going on between Deerflame and Eelfrost, both were nervous to explain their feelings to each other so both confided in Heartstorm who found it extremely cute. He was glad that Deerflame liked Eelfrost instead of Sparkbelly. He couldn't stand Sparkbelly and Deerflame together, it would be too weird and Sparkbelly just wasn't the kind of cat who had all the right personality and characteristics to be a good mate to Deerflame.

"They do hang out a lot and I think Eelfrost is interested in Deerflame," said Heartstorm, not wanting to get

Sparkbelly's hopes too high. "And Deerflame is interested in h-" Sparkbelly's eyes were wide and shocked.

"What do you mean?" he questioned. "Who does she has an interest in?" Heartstorm didn't want to be the one to break the news to Sparkbelly that Deerflame thought Sparkbelly was pretty dumb and liked Eelfrost.

"Um.., I don't know, she didn't tell me," lied Heartstorm.

"So do you think she likes me?" asked Sparkbelly excitedly.

"Well..., maybe?" squeaked Heartstorm. He then spotted Hawkpaw, trotting back to them and was glad for the distraction. "Any sign of ThunderClan passing the border?" Hawkpaw shook his head. Dustpaw returned to them as well. Heartstorm nodded but padded to the side of the river and sniffed just in case. The smell of ThunderClan wafted from their side to theirs but there was no sign that they had crossed. He padded to the side of the tunnel where plants lay dead on the ground or ruffled and messy after the scramble of ThunderClan cats fleeing back to their side. But there was no sign or scent to indicate they had returned. With a satisfied smile, Heartstorm returned to Sparkbelly and the two apprentices and they headed back to camp. Sparkbelly was deep in conversation with Dustpaw.

"Tomorrow we'll be training in fighting," Sparkbelly was telling Dustpaw.

"But you said we could practise hunting birds!" protested Dustpaw. Sparkbelly cast a look at Heartstorm and Hawkpaw then turned back to Dustpaw.

"Well, change of plan. You need to master the leap and hold," Sparkbelly retorted firmly. Dustpaw sighed. Heartstorm felt a feeling of smugness settle over him as Hawkpaw had already mastered the move a quarter moon ago.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Hawkpaw.

Heartstorm felt that Hawkpaw had done well that day and deserved a day off.

"Eat something, rest," Heartstorm told him, "and tomorrow, we'll meet at noon for training at the clearing. And remember your duty to feed the elders!" Hawkpaw nodded then bounded ahead, happy for his free time. Heartstorm slipped back into camp and wandered towards Reedpelt. Reedpelt smiled to him.

"Is there a hunting patrol?" asked Heartstorm, aching to hunt.

"No," replied Reedpelt. "But I did want one so could you please lead one?" Heartstorm nodded.

"Sure," he said and headed straight to find Silverdrop, Deerflame and Eelfrost. He spotted Deerflame and Eelfrost talking over a mouse which they had almost finished but could find no sign of Silverdrop. His best friends greeted him happily.

"Wanna come on a hunting patrol with you?" asked Heartstorm. Deerflame immediately got up.

"Sure," Eelfrost grunted and heaved himself up.

"How's training with Hawkpaw?" asked Deerflame.

"Great," grinned Heartstorm. "Sparkbelly wants Hawkpaw and Dustpaw to train together and he's so competitive." Eelfrost giggled.

"Does he even know how to teach?" he muttered under his breath. "It'll always be a mystery why Thornstar chose him to be a mentor." Deerflame gave Eelfrost a sharp look but seemed to agree.

"Don't talk about others that way," she said half heartedly. "Heartstorm, have you talked to Sparkbelly lately because he keeps looking at me in weird ways." Eelfrost burst into laughter.

"It's true!" he exclaimed. "I saw him the other day! He saw Deerflame and made this weird face - like this-" Eelfrost grimaced and stuck his tongue out. Heartstorm couldn't help but laugh. He did feel slightly bad that they were making fun of Sparkbelly but it was only the truth.

"He likes you," Heartstorm informed Deerflame. "He told me." Instead of being jealous Eelfrost burst into more laughter.

"Can you imagine him and Deerflame?" he asked Heartstorm. Deerflame rolled her eyes. "Ha!"

"Well if they were together," put in Heartstorm. "Deerflame has enough brains for the both of them." Eelfrost agreed heartily. Deerflame seemed hurt by this.

"I'm not going to be with him!" she protested. "He's- not my type."

"You mean he's clueless," muttered Eelfrost under his breath.

"It's not his fault," retorted Deerflame. The three friends made their way into the forest, joking about Sparkbelly and Deerflame being mates.

Ch. 41

"That was much better!" beamed Heartstorm.

"Thanks," grinned Hawkpaw.

"Let's try the back kick again then let's try the dodge and nip technique once more," said Heartstorm. Hawkpaw positioned himself and in an explosive jump, kicked out his hind legs, putting all his weight on his front paws.

"Good job," said Heartstorm, stretching and shaking of where Hawkpaw had kicked him. "One more time." Hawkpaw did it once more, his kick sharp and quick.

"Can I try the dodge and nip technique?" asked Hawkpaw. He found it the most fun as he could use it against larger opponents, such as Heartstorm and he was swift and quick which made him very good at it.

"Of course," nodded Heartstorm. "You're going to master this move, I know it." Hawkpaw smiled happily and crouched. Heartstorm attacked, bringing his front paws down for a front paw strike but Hawkpaw quickly dodged and twisted away to Heartstorm's side. Heartstorm turned and lashed out but Hawkpaw was quick to slip away and managed to land a small nip on Heartstorm's shoulder. They continued like that, Heartstorm retaliating and attacking and Hawkpaw, dodging swiftly then biting and nipping where he could. Finally, they stopped and Hawkpaw collapsed on the ground, panting. Heartstorm as well, took a break, breathing heavily.

"That was good," announced Heartstorm finally. "Tomorrow, you will be training with Dustpaw. You'll be doing some fighting and perhaps some fishing. I'll see with Sparkbelly." Hawkpaw's ears perked up with excitement.

"Cool!" he exclaimed. "Is Rosepaw coming too?"

"I'll need to talk to Applenose about that," said Heartstorm thoughtfully, not liking the idea of talking to grumpy Applenose.

"Hi," said Hawkpaw, looking at someone behind Heartstorm. Heartstorm swivelled around. Silverdrop had entered the clearing. His heart pounded and he smiled.

"Hey, Hawkpaw," Silverdrop said cheerily. "How's training? I hope Heartstorm's not tiring you."

"No, I learn the back kick today and the dodge and nip technique!" Hawkpaw told Silverdrop excitedly.

"And he mastered it," added Heartstorm proudly.

"I was never able to do the back kick, I hated it. Still hate it," Silverdrop said. Heartstorm laughed.

"What brings you here?" he asked her lightly. He was torn between wanting to teach Hawkpaw more and his duties as a mentor and going for a walk with Silverdrop.

"Wanted to see you train," she shrugged. "There's nothing to do. But Thornstar also told me to get you both back before sunset. It's a Gathering tonight. He wants to know if you-" Silverdrop glanced at Hawkpaw. "Well, if you think Hawkpaw can go." Hawkpaw's eyes brightened.

"Can I?" he cried.

"Of course," Heartstorm said. Silverdrop beckoned them and they made their way back to camp. It was just before sunset and Heartstorm told Hawkpaw to go eat something.

"What's it like?" Hawkpaw was asking. "Is ThunderClan going to be there? Is Thornstar going to speak? While I see other apprentices? From other Clans, I mean." Heartstorm chuckled.

"Go get something to eat," he urged. "And you'll see for yourself tonight." Hawkpaw huffed but excitedly trotted to the fresh-kill pile where his siblings were. Heartstorm turned to Silverdrop.

"How was your day?" he asked.

"Normal," shrugged Silverdrop.

"Do you still have those dreams?" asked Heartstorm softly.

"I told you, they're everynight," she said with a shrug. "I see you die, everynight."

"What can I do to stop them?" whispered Heartstorm, distressed. "Is there anything that could stop them?" Silverdrop shrugged.

"Never asked," she said without care.

"We've got to tell someone, Thornstar, Reedpelt, Frogleap, someone," Heartstorm said. Silverdrop gave Heartstorm a stern look.

"You can't do that," Silverdrop said. Heartstorm opened his mouth to protest. "Heartstorm! You have to promise me- swear to me, you won't tell anyone!"

"But, I don't want you to get hurt," Heartstorm said.

"I won't get hurt.., but- but you might," she said, as if something was dawning on her.

"You're not telling anybody," Heartstorm said, finally changing his mind. "You can't become a medicine cat." Silverdrop looked at Heartstorm, thoughtful.

"If we tell anyone," Silverdrop said slowly.

"It'll be bad for both of us," finished Heartstorm.

"so it's our secret," Silverdrop said. Heartstorm nodded. Their secret.

Heartstorm beckoned Hawkpaw to his side.

"Tonight is the full moon," announced Thornstar. "There will be a Gathering, those going are Smoketail, Embergaze, Stripedfur, Moorpelt, Hawkpaw, Dustpaw, Rosepaw, Heartstorm, Sparkbelly and Applenose." Hawkpaw jumped to his feet and cried out happily.

"Thanks!" he told Heartstorm then he pranced away to celebrate with Rosepaw and Dustpaw. Sparkbelly joined Heartstorm's side.

"Let's make the training tomorrow at sunrise," Sparkbelly said.

"They'll be tired after the Gathering," pointed out Heartstorm. "Is the afternoon alright?" Sparkbelly seemed to take this as another opportunity for Heartstorm to train Hawkpaw more.

"No," replied Sparkbelly quickly. "Sunrise." Heartstorm watched him retreated in amusement. Hawkpaw returned to Heartstorm, pelting him with questions.

"You'll see," Heartstorm said. "Come on, we're leaving now." Hawkpaw squealed happily and trotted before Heartstorm towards the camp entrance. Thornstar was there with Frogleap and the other warriors. When all the cats were gathered and Reedpelt joined them, they made their way out. They raced towards the Gathering together.

Ch. 42

"Are we there yet?" squeaked Hawkpaw. Heartstorm rolled his eyes.

"Look there," he nodded to the silhouette of the Four Trees in the distance.

"Yeah I see it!" cried Hawkpaw.

"Come on, let's speed up and we'll get there faster," Thornstar said with a chuckle seeing how excited Hawkpaw was. The whole group of RiverClan cats sped up and reached the Four Trees. Heartstorm made sure he kept Hawkpaw in his sight. Heartstorm spotted a huddle of cats and smelt the familiar scent of ShadowClan. Hawkpaw who had never smelt ShadowClan before, gaped.

"Wow!" he gasped. "Is that ShadowClan?" Heartstorm felt their piercing eyes on him even if they were hidden in the shadows.

"Yeah," Heartstorm replied distractedly. "Stay close to me." Hawkpaw walked close to Heartstorm, his eyes on the ShadowClan cats. Heartstorm recognised all of them. Memories threatened to flood back but Heartstorm pushed them away, looking away from the ShadowClan cats. Thornstar and Frogleap headed towards the ShadowClan leader and medicine cat by the foot of a large rock. Hawkpaw was looking about in awe.

"When is WindClan and ThunderClan coming?" asked Hawkpaw.

"Soon," answered Heartstorm. He led his apprentice to another side of the clearing. None of the RiverClan or ShadowClan cats mixed, talking in whispers to each other. Suddenly, a strong whiff blew by. Heartstorm recognised it as WindClan.

"What Clan is it?" Heartstorm asked Hawkpaw. Hawkpaw snapped out of his thoughts and sniffed the air. He frowned.

"Um..., I don't smell any-" Hawkpaw stopped talking, concentrating and finally gasped. "WindClan!" Heartstorm nodded satisfied. WindClan poured into the clearing. A few WindClan cats turned to talk to ShadowClan but most of them mixed with RiverClan.

"Can I go talk to other apprentices?" asked Hawkpaw shyly. Heartstorm didn't want Hawkpaw to talk to ShadowClan but nodded.

"Yes, but steer clear off ShadowClan," Heartstorm said, feeling a certain protective side coming up. "Understand?" Hawkpaw nodded enthusiastically and trotted towards WindClan. Heartstorm kept his eyes on Hawkpaw but then had to turn his attention away when he felt a ShadowClan cat approach him. He turned sharply and came face to face with Honeylight. She gave him a defiant look.

"Hello Honeylight," Heartstorm said cooly. He found himself calm and under control. It surprised him how he was not freaking out but was glad.

"Heartstorm," stated Honeylight. She glanced at her Clan. Heartstorm glanced at them instinctively as well. Nightcloud, Rabbitleap and Firfrost were regarding him with cold looks.

"Yes?" asked Heartstorm lightly. "Is there anything you'd like to say? I really need to be going." Heartstorm pretended to look for someone. He spotted Hawkpaw, talking to a WindClan warrior.

"We haven't talked for a while," Honeylight said softly, pointing out the obvious.

"Hmm," Heartstorm replied. What did she want? They were not in the same Clan anymore. Did Honeylight think they still had something between them? Honeylight seemed to be hesitating to tell Heartstorm something. Out of nowhere, Clawpelt appeared.

"Honeylight, it's starting," he beckoned to her. Honeylight turned to Heartstorm, opened her mouth to say something but then closed it, seeming to think better of it.

"Just.. be careful," Honeylight finally said.

"Honeylight!" called a sharp voice. It was Firfrost, giving Heartstorm a withering look. Honeylight turned to her brother and nodded. She then padded away without another word. Heartstorm stood, dazed but finally found sense and quickly searched for Hawkpaw as people were starting to settle down. He spotted Hawkpaw, looking around and caught his eyes. He flicked his tail, signing Hawkpaw to come. Hawkpaw trotted to Heartstorm and sat down beside him.

"Is it starting?" he asked excitedly.

"Yes," nodded Heartstorm. Hawkpaw watched intently. Thornstar and the other leaders leapt onto the rock. Heartstorm wondered who would start first. Fawnstar stepped forward.

"WindClan has been blessed with new kits," she announced. "Ravenfall and Cloverwish's kits, Lilykit and Crowkit." WindClan burst into cheers and RiverClan and ThunderClan joined in. Heartstorm didn't care to look if ShadowClan were participating, he knew they would not.

"ThunderClan is glad to hear of new life," said Falconstar, stepping up, not sounding very happy at all. "Sadly, Applenose has joined StarClan." All the cats in the clearing dipped their heads in respect. Everyone waited for Falconstar to elaborate but he didn't. He just slipped back into the shadows. Next, Thornstar walked forward.

"I'm sorry to hear for ThunderClan's loss," Thornstar said though he did not show it or mean it. "ThunderClan has lost a loyal, strong and brave warrior, Wolfstep in a fight at our border and ThunderClan's border. ThunderClan attempted to attack one of our patrols, which consisted of three warriors and one small apprentice against a whole group of ThunderClan cats of around six. Perhaps more. Wolfstep attempted to save our apprentice, who

was being unmercifully attacked. He was killed saving our apprentice. RiverClan, all the Clans, will honour Wolfstep for his bravery and loyalty forever." Heartstorm, along with all of RiverClan, dipped their heads in respect, so did many other cats. Falconstar stepped into the moonlight, his eyes blazing. He opened his mouth to say something but Thornstar continued.

"We, of course, put ThunderClan back behind their border and the problem has been solved," Thornstar continued. RiverClan burst into cheers. "And now, to Cinderstar."

"Wow, Thornstar isn't even scared of Falconstar!" whispered Hawkpaw excitedly. "I can't believe he just did that!" Heartstorm chuckled.

"Yes, Thornstar can be very honest and blunt at times," nodded Heartstorm. Cinderstar appeared in the moonlight. Her pelt was lit up and she blinked away from the light, as if it hurt her. Her eyes were red and bloodshot. Heartstorm felt a shiver run down his spine. Cinderstar's fur wasn't well groomed and she stood in a stance which made it look like she was about to leap at any moment. Her tail was low, in a hostile way and she scanned the clearing coldly. Hawkpaw shivered next to Heartstorm and shuffled nearer.

"Cinderstar is scary," whispered Hawkpaw.

"I know, but she's harmless," comforted Heartstorm, not believing his words. He glanced at ShadowClan to see their reaction to seeing their leader look so badly groomed in front of all the Clans. But instead of seeing looks of disgust, he saw their looks of apprehension, their eyes sparkling. Cinderstar hissed. Heartstorm couldn't believe how much she had changed since he had last seen her. She looked so tired and angry.

"ShadowClan is stronger than ever," she hissed softly but everybody heard her. Heartstorm gave Hawkpaw a reassuring look. "But RiverClan won't be for long." Heartstorm sprang to his feet at this, so did many other RiverClan warriors. They growled and lashed their tails angrily. Thornstar remained calm, flicking his tail to signal for RiverClan to stay down. Heartstorm, out fo respect

to his leader, sat back down. Slowly RiverClan sat down, muttering and growling under their breath. They shot glares at ShadowClan.

"What does she mean?" whispered Hawkpaw in mild horror.

"Nothing for now," reassured Heartstorm. "She's just a crazy delusional cat." But as he said this, he remembered her words "Never underestimate your enemy". He dismissed the thought.

"ShadowClan, remember what the Gathering is for," Falconstar snapped. He still had not forgotten her words at the last Gathering and watched her with disdain and disgust. Cinderstar ignored him, glaring at the clearing.

"I'll remind you," Falconstar continued, his voice tinged with disgust. "It is to share to all the Clans the going on of your Clan. *Not* to give empty petty threats. I'll repeat, it's *not* to snarl angrily some random threats."

"I have to say, Cinderstar," Thornstar joined in. "Falconstar is quite right. RiverClan is not mildly disturbed or scared of your empty little threats. And you don't look so well yourself- maybe you should get another cat - Clawpelt perhaps, to talk for you?" ThunderClan roared indignantly. Heartstorm looked down at Hawkpaw who was smiling happily at Thornstar.

"Wow, he's so cool," Hawkpaw murmured in awe. Cinderstar lashed her tail. She then leapt in front of Thornstar who didn't flinch but kept his eyes on her. She brought her face right up to his and spat at him.

"RiverClan won't be so smug when we're done with you!" she snarled, her voice laced with hatred and anger. RiverClan growled and shouted indignantly at her lack of respect for their leader. Thornstar just looked unimpressed.

"You seem to have lost control," Thornstar pointed out cooly. "Your saliva seems to have unceremoniously sprayed everywhere. Disgusting even." Cinderstar's eyes flashed. ThunderClan and RiverClan burst into laughter. Thornstar gave a

small comical bow to the crowd. WindClan joined in with the cheers this time. Cinderstar snarled and leapt down the rock before storming off. Her Clan, hissing and snarling, followed her.

"Wow," Hawkpaw goggled. "That. Was. So. Cool." Thornstar leapt down and smiled to his Clan.

"Are we ready to part?" he asked pleasantly. Reedpelt nodded mutely. Thornstar turned to the other leaders. "We need to depart. Farewell and fare well." With that Thornstar walked away, followed by his Clan. Hawkpaw was chattering excitedly to Heartstorm the whole way back. Heartstorm couldn't help but be excited himself. Cinderstar had been so rude. She had seemed totally crazy but Thornstar had handled it all well. Heartstorm wished if that had happened to him up there he would act just as calm. He found himself returning to camp with a new found respect for Thornstar. Hawkpaw was still chattering away when they arrived. Heartstorm smiled at Hawkpaw with amusement.

"Right, tomorrow is going to be an early and long day," Heartstorm told Hawkpaw then under his breath, "no thanks to Sparkbelly."

"Did you see Thornstar?" Hawkpaw was still saying.

"Yes I did," Heartstorm smiled with a small sigh. "Now get some rest. Try not to talk about it the whole night with Dustpaw and Rosepaw, it'll be a long day tomorrow. You need to wake up at dawn." Hawkpaw nodded but clearly did not look like he intended to sleep now. Heartstorm did not expect Hawkpaw to either. If Heartstorm had been an apprentice, he would have returned to the den and would have talked about it the whole night with Eelfrost and Deerflame. As he trotted towards the warrior's den, he had a feeling that was exactly what he was going to do.

Ch. 43

Heartstorm woke up stiff and grumpy. He looked around the warrior's den and did not see Sparkbelly. With a sigh, he heaved himself out of his nest and headed to the apprentice den. It was almost past dawn and the sky was a light blue. He peered into the apprentice den. Sure enough, only Rosepaw and Hawkpaw remained. Hawkpaw was sleeping soundly and Heartstorm did not wish to wake him. But he padded into the den to wake Hawkpaw all the same.

"Hawkpaw," Heartstorm said softly. "It's dawn. There's training." Hawkpaw mumbled and turned away. "I don't want to wake up this early but you've got training with Dustpaw." Hawkpaw didn't move this time, snoring gently. Heartstorm sighed and prodded Hawkpaw on the rib. Still Hawkpaw just mumbled and pushed Heartstorm's paw away.

"Hawkpaw, it's time to wake up," Heartstorm said more firmly. Hawkpaw kept sleeping. Heartstorm bent down and nipped Hawkpaw on the ear. His eyes blinked open.

"Wha?" he muttered. Heartstorm prodded him gently on the rib once more.

"Come on, time to train. Wake up. I'll give you a few more minutes. Meet me at the camp entrance," Heartstorm relented. Hawkpaw murmured yes then curled up into a ball. Heartstorm headed towards the small stream for a fresh drink. He reached the stream, the water trickling gently and lapped the cool fresh water. Then he stepped into the river and splashed himself. He shivered in the sudden cold and shook himself but he was awake. He padded towards the camp entrance. He waited for a while until a bleary eyes Hawkpaw appeared, yawning and walking drowsily.

"Good morning," Heartstorm said brightly and led his apprentice out towards the clearing. "You ready for training?"

"Why so early?" moaned Hawkpaw.

"You're training with Dustpaw today," said Heartstorm. "Do you want to go by the river so you can freshen up?"

"Yeah please," Hawkpaw sighed. They made a detour and headed for the river. Hawkpaw stuck his head into the rushing water and emerged dripping wet but very much awake.

"So what are we going to train?" asked Hawkpaw, more like himself. Heartstorm smiled.

"Fighting. It'll be good for you, to spar with someone your own size," explained Heartstorm.

"Cool," said Hawkpaw. They heard some shouting and Heartstorm pricked his ears.

"Come on Dustpaw! Run faster!" the voice was saying. It was Sparkbelly. Heartstorm chuckled and they came upon the clearing where Dustpaw was jogging and Sparkbelly yelling instructions.

"Good morning Sparkbelly," called Heartstorm. Sparkbelly turned to him, smiled and called Dustpaw to stop and take a break. Dustpaw collapsed on the floor, breathing hard.

"Sorry for being slightly late," apologised Heartstorm not so sorrily.

"It's alright," huffed Sparkbelly. "Should we start with a fight?" Heartstorm shook his head.

"Hawkpaw needs to warm up," he said. "Run a few laps alright?" Hawkpaw nodded and started to run. Sparkbelly turned to Dustpaw.

"Practise your back kick on that tree," he ordered. Dustpaw obliged reluctantly. When Hawkpaw had run four laps, Heartstorm told him to rest for a minute.

"Alright, now let's just start with an easy spar,"

Heartstorm said finally. Hawkpaw nodded and faced Heartstorm. He leapt forward, swiping his front paw out and Heartstorm stepped back to dodge it. When they had finished, Sparkbelly was waiting impatiently.

"Right, is your warm up over?" he asked.

"You think your warm up's over?" asked Heartstorm to Hawkpaw when Hawkpaw gave Heartstorm a questioning look. Hawkpaw shrugged. "Right then, we can start." Sparkbelly's eyes lit up.

"You will both fight, friendly of course. No claws. Whoever wants to give up first, loses," Sparkbelly said. "And let's say, the winner doesn't need to hunt for the elders for a quarter moon and the loser has to hunt for the winner to feed the elders." Heartstorm thought it slightly harsh.

"Don't you think this is a bit harsh? It is part of the apprentice's job to take care of Clan, which means taking care of the elders. They need to learn from a young age that even doing the small things, such as feeding the elders, it is part of helping the Clan," Heartstorm said unsurely. Sparkbelly shrugged.

"Are we good with the rules then?" asked Sparkbelly. Dustpaw and Hawkpaw nodded. "Good, then face each other. Three, two, one..... start!" Dustpaw immediately leapt forward. Hawkpaw dodged but Dustpaw caught Hawkpaw on the side. Heartstorm watched with anticipation, finding himself very nervous. Sparkbelly was watching Dustpaw with concentration, yelling for him to fight on. Dustpaw attacked once more, going in for a clumsy but heavy front paw strike. Hawkpaw dodged with ease and twisted to land behind Dustpaw, without waiting, he bit into Dustpaw's tail. Dustpaw swivelled around and started to lash out his front paws angrily to get Hawkpaw away. Hawkpaw had to jump out of his way then when for a strong back kick. Dustpaw was put out of balance and Heartstorm breathed a sigh of relief. But Hawkpaw had hesitated and Dustpaw leapt on him, this time, hitting the target. They toppled to the ground, wrestling. Hawkpaw was smaller and Dustpaw managed to pin him down. Heartstorm watched, his heart racing. Sparkbelly was grinning, victory gleaming in his eyes. But

Hawkpaw let himself relax and Dustpaw slackened his grip. Swiftly, Hawkpaw slipped away from Dustpaw's grasp and before Dustpaw could react, he went for a front paw blow. Dustpaw staggered back, looking dizzy.

"Come on Dustpaw!" barked Sparkbelly. "Don't give up yet! It was just a small blow. Go for a back kick! No- don't do that! What was- lunge! Lunge! Lunge! No why did you do tha- dodge it! No what are you doing? Yes yes yes yes! That's it!" Sparkbelly was jumping up and down with excitement. Dustpaw swiped at Hawkpaw who tried and failed to duck. He tumbled to the ground and Dustpaw pounced on him. Hawkpaw though, was ready and pushed Dustpaw back, leaping to his feet. Sparkbelly was on the edge, yelling instructions but Dustpaw wasn't listening. Heartstorm watched, trying not to show too much emotion. He noted as many mistakes and good things which Hawkpaw did so he could give him a good feedback later, after all the whole point of this was to train and get better. Heartstorm now saw that with an opponent his size, Hawkpaw was a very talented fighter. He was swift, quick and thought on the spot. Dustpaw leapt onto Hawkpaw's back and Hawkpaw staggered with the weight. He grit his teeth and managed to let one side of his body down. Dustpaw fell to the ground in surprise. Hawkpaw bit into his shoulder and yanked him up. Dustpaw reared back, trying to twist and claw at Hawkpaw with his sheathed claws but was not able to. Dustpaw finally shook himself free of Hawkpaw and threw out his front foot, tripping Hawkpaw. Heartstorm was finding it hard to watch calmly now. He wanted to jump out and shout like Sparkbelly but he knew it wouldn't do Hawkpaw any good. Sparkbelly only seemed to be distracting Dustpaw.

"Dustpaw! Bite his shoulder- not like that! Pin him down. No twist- TWIST! What was that!? You did so much better in training! ... I see him tiring! Dustpaw! Hawkpaw is tiring! Keep it up! Dodge- agh, don't do that... Wait no! I told you not to ever do that again! How many tim- no no no no no. Eek!" Sparkbelly yelled, making weird faces. Heartstrom chuckled with amusement. Now, both the apprentices were tiring. Sparkbelly kept yelling more instructions to Dustpaw, louder and louder. Hawkpaw was totally concentrated, not caring about Sparkbelly, not distracted. But

Dustpaw, was attempting to listen to Sparkbelly and block his yelling out.

"Can," Dustpaw panted in between blows, "you." Hawkpaw leapt at him and onto his back but Dustpaw shook him off. "Stop." Hawkpaw lashed out at his face and he stumbled back. "Yelling?!" Hawkpaw reared up and brought his two paws onto Dustpaw's unprotected back. Dustpaw collapsed to the ground, breathing heavily. Sparkbelly seemed about to join into the fight, biting his lip.

"Get up... get up get up," repeated Sparkbelly. But Dustpaw lay on the ground, jut panting hard. Hawkpaw watched him, not knowing whether to continue or not. Sparkbelly was losing hope in his apprentice.

"Dustpaw..., get up," Sparkbelly insisted. "It isn't over." Hawkpaw cocked his head.

"Seems over to me," Hawkpaw said then looked up at Heartstorm and grinned. "I won didn't I?" Heartstorm smiled back and gave a small nod. Sparkbelly stomped his foot.

"It's not over. Dustpaw hasn't said he's given up yet," Sparkbelly said. Hearing this, Dustpaw lifted his head.

"I give up," he huffed. Hawkpaw grinned and pranced to Heartstorm.

"How did I do?" he asked happily.

"You did great!" Heartstorm assured him. "You're going to make a good warrior." Sparkbelly was helping Dustpaw to his feet. Dustpaw flashed a small smile at Hawkpaw.

"Guess you don't need to feed the elders for a quarter moon," Dustpaw said. Hawkpaw turned to Heartstorm, his eyes wide.

"but I want to hunt for them," he told Heartstorm. "You said that part of being a warrior and helping their Clan is to feed the elders, you're right. It's *my* responsibility." Heartstorm

smiled proudly.

"You're right. I'm proud of you. This is what being a real warrior means," Heartstorm approved.

"Well then, good job, come on Dustpaw, time to go," Sparkbelly said looking dejected.

"That was fun," grinned Dustpaw. "Can we do it again?" Hawkpaw nodded enthusiastically. Heartstorm raised his eyebrows at Sparkbelly. He thought maybe Sparkbelly would not be too keen seeing as his apprentice had lost but Sparkbelly nodded.

"Of course, it was good learning practise," Sparkbelly said to Heartstorm's surprise. And he even seemed to be honest.

"Great then," exclaimed Heartstorm. "We'll talk about it then." Sparkbelly nodded and turned to Dustpaw.

"Come on, we've got some fishing to do. You did well today, you tried your best," Sparkbelly said understandingly. Heartstorm watched them go and thought maybe Sparkbelly wasn't that bad of a mentor.

"What are we going to do now?" piped in Hawkpaw. Heartstorm snapped back to the present.

"Oh right," Heartstorm said. "You did well, how about we do a bit of hunting, let's go through the different techniques and positions. And next time, we can train with Rosepaw."

Ch. 44

"Here," smiled Heartstorm, dropping the mouse by Silverdrop. He settled down beside her.

"How was training?" she asked.

"Great," Heartstorm said. "I'm giving half the day off today. He did very well yesterday."

"What did Sparkbelly think?" asked Silverdrop.

"He was actually open for another training," Heartstorm said. "He said the loser would have to hunt for the elders for the winner. But Hawkpaw said he wanted to feed the elders. He's going to be a great warrior one day, I know he will."

"That is very noble," agreed Silverdrop. "You know, about what you told me about the Gathering." Heartstorm nudged the mouse to her.

"Eat," he said. She took a bite then pushed it to Heartstorm. He took a small nibble and pushed it back to her.

"I think we should not take what Cinderstar said lightly," Silverdrop said.

"But we can't take her seriously. I mean, you should have seen her!" Heartstorm explained. "She looked crazy. Like she hadn't slept for days. She could not have been thinking straight."

"But from what everybody is saying, she only looked crazy, that doesn't mean she wasn't thinking right," Silverdrop put in.

"Look, I know her... well I knew her. And she's changed a lot. She used to be so wise and understanding but... now she's different. And honestly, ShadowClan is a joke," Heartstorm said. "They can't just threaten us at every Gathering. They did it last

time, and they didn't do anything."

"From what I heard, last time, they didn't threaten you. They warned you," Silverdrop pointed out.

"Look, just don't get all worked up. Here- eat," Heartstorm said, sliding the half eaten mouse to Silverdrop. She sighed but took a bite.

"Heartstorm listen," Silverdrop said finally. "Just be careful. Something is happening to ShadowClan. Maybe Cinderstar is part of it. Maybe she isn't... We don't know. So just be careful."

"We don't even share the same border," Heartstorm said in exasperation then at Silverdrop's look, "fine. Fine, I'll be careful."

"Blizzardkit...," Silverdrop added.

"Is just a kit," finished Heartstorm. "I'll be careful alright?" Silverdrop nodded. "Here finish, the rest of the mouse." Silveddrop gobbled the rest of the mouse.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" suggested Heartstorm.

"Sure," shrugged Silverdrop. They got up and headed for the camp entrance. The slipped under the tunnel and out of camp, a gentle breeze ruffling their fur. The air was still and calm. Birds chirped and the sun shone brightly. It was a beautiful day.

"So, about those kits," Heartstorm said. Silverdrop laughed.

"Say, we did have kits," Silverdrop said. "What would you want to call them?"

"If it's a she-cat..., Brightkit," Heartstorm said. "In honour, of my mother." Silverdrop nodded.

"And if it's a tom?" asked Silverdrop. "Hopefully not naming him after your father." Heartstorm laughed.

"Never," he said. "I don't know... maybe Bumblekit, as

you said. But it depends on how he'll look." Silverdrop nodded and they lapsed into silence. They walked calmly through the forest, listening to the sounds of nature. Then they heard some sort of rasping.

"What was that?" said Heartstorm, looking around. Silverdrop pricked her ears and stood still. Her tail twitched.

"Over there," she nodded. Heartstorm peered at the bushes she was looking at. They were nearing the river at the WindClan border.

"Do you think WindClan is in our territory?" whispered Heartstorm, his fur rising. He prepared himself to launch himself at any unwanted cats.

"Maybe," Silverdrop replied. "Let's find out." They inched closer, Heartstorm looked around while Silverdrop had her eyes fixed forward. They slipped past a few bushes. Then there was a loud breathing and then a growl. Heartstorm's ears pricked and he stood still, ready to attack. Then the bush rustled and out came a cat. Heartstorm crouched and growled immediately knowing this was no RiverClan cat. Silverdrop hissed and unsheathed her claws. The cat stumbled and looked up. Her fur was badly groomed and her eyes bloodshot. She looked terrible, like an angry rogue. Heartstorm's first thought was "Rogue"! But as he looked closer, ready to attack, he realised something...

"Cinderstar!" He exclaimed in half a growl. Cinderstar had blood pouring down her right shoulder. She barred her teeth, yellow fangs. Silverdrop looked disgusted.

"That's Cinderstar?" she gaped.

"Wait, if she's here, who else could be?" Heartstorm realised. Silverdrop snapped her head up, knowing Cinderstar was no longer their priority. Heartstorm brushed past Cinderstar and Silverdrop, scanning and sniffing for more ShadowClan cats.

"Don't worry," said Cinderstar hoarsely. "I'm alone." Heartstorm didn't believe or trust her.

"Stay here," he told Silverdrop. "Keep your eye on her. I'm just going to check." Heartstorm made his way towards the river, slowly and silently. He walked out of the comfort of the forest and nearer to the river. A strong wind from WindClan blew, only bringing the scent of WindClan. No scent of ShadowClan. Heartstorm, sure the coast was clear, returned to Silverdrop. His mind was reeling with questions but he knew they had to bring Cinderstar back to camp to Thornstar first. As he spotted Silverdrop, facing Cinderstar, he had the strong urge to claw Cinderstar's pelt off but resisted.

"Let's go," he barked. "Follow us." Cinderstar didn't look in any condition to follow them but obliged. She dragged behind them. Heartstorm slowed down so he could walk behind her and stop her if she tried to escape.

"What are you doing here?" asked Heartstorm, his voice dripping with hatred and force.

"ShadowClan kicked me out," Cinderstar said, clearing her throat.

"They kicked you out?" frowned Silverdrop. Cinderstar sniggered.

"Surprised?" she mocked.

"Not really," shrugged Silverdrop. "Should've seen it coming. I mean, you look badly groomed and totally crazy. I would've expected it."

"I should've too," grunted Cinderstar.

"Why are you here?" hissed Heartstorm. "Why did you come here?"

"You should be thanking me," retorted Cinderstar. "Came here to warn you." Heartstorm snorted.

"As if," he laughed.

"Oh yes, ShadowClan is not happy with you. Honestly, I'm

not either but I still remember you, as that small innocent kit and apprentice," Cinderstar said. "And yes, you did spoil my time as a leader... but..."

"I'm not that innocent kit and apprentice anymore," hissed Heartstorm. "I'm a warrior. And you better give us a straight explanation when we bring you to Thornstar or I'll show you just how uninnocent I am." They had reached the camp and Greyspeck had ducked out of the tunnel and was staring at Cinderstar.

"W-what? How?" stammered Greyspeck.

"She crossed the WindClan border... Apparently ShadowClan kicked her out," Silverdrop said, her voice laced with distrust." Greyseck followed them into camp. Cats gathered around, gaping and murmuring. Thornstar appeared, pushing through the crowd.

"Frogleap!" he called. Frogleap pushed through the crowd, mumbling. "Treat her. In my den." Frogleap nodded and beckoned Cinderstar forward. Cinderstar followed him, glaring at the staring cats. She got hisses and spits in return.

"Reedpelt," Thornstar said. "Follow them. Make sure she doesn't do anything unwanted." Reedpelt nodded and tailed Frogleap and Cinderstar. Thornstar beckoned Heartstorm and Silverdrop to a more private place to talk.

"What happened?" he asked.

"We were walking," Silverdrop started. "And we heard some rasping and some sort of noise."

"We thought it was WindClan, crossing the border," Heartstorm said. "But she came out of this bush and she looked horrible. I checked for other ShadowClan cats but there was no sign."

"She claims that ShadowClan kicked her out. She said she's here to warn us," mocked Silverdrop. Thornstar looked deadly serious.

"Right, I'll talk to her," he nodded. "Good job, bringing her directly and checking on her." Heartstorm nodded. They watched Thornstar disappear in his den. Silverdrop and Heartstorm were crowded with other warriors, wanting to know what happened. Deerflame and Eelfrost scampered to Heartstorm's side.

"You alright?" asked Deerflame, eyes wide.

"Yeah yeah," assured Heartstorm.

"Wow! Dude, nice catch. Bringing in the ShadowClan leader," grinned Eelfrost.

"I was with Silverdrop," pointed out Heartstorm with a grin.

"Good job," said Eelfrost to Silverdrop. "Reckon she's here to take revenge? Like she said?" Heartstorm scoffed.

"Not sure she's really in shape to do that," pointed out Deerflame.

"Nah, she looks like she could totally tear us apart," laughed Eelfrost. Heartstorm smiled at his friend's silliness. It was good to have someone who could laugh at a serious matter and lighten the mood. Suddenly, Thornstar called to Silverdrop and Heartstorm.

"You need to come," he told them. Heartstorm shot a confused look at Eelfrost who shrugged. Silverdrop and Heartstorm headed for Thornstar's den.

"She won't talk without both of you," Thornstar whispered to them before letting them into the den. Heartstorm sat down, confused. Inside, the den was dimly lit and Cinderstar already looked better. She had drunk water and her fur was more groomed although her eyes remained blood red. She stared at the group of cats. Reedpelt was sitting restlessly, Frogleap was looking at her with pure hatred and disgust and Thornstar watched calmly.

"Now explain," Thornstar said, softly but firmly. Cinderstar bent down to take a lick of water before clearing her throat and

eyeing Heartstorm.

"Ever since Heartpaw- Heartstorm joined RiverClan, ShadowClan have been angry at him and RiverClan. How dare he, a traitor, just leave ShadowClan and become RiverClan, happily, without a thought," Cinderstar started then burst into a fit of coughing. Nobody mad a move to help her. Not even Frogleap. Heartstorm frowned.

"So," continued Cinderstar, looking hurt that nobody had helped her. "They all demanded revenge. Especially, Goldenheart. She was a queen but somehow, she seemed the most keen on revenge. I didn't want to fight..., I mean I did hate Heartstorm. He made my time as a leader so much harder than it should have been. ShadowClan kept hissing, demanding for action. Clawpelt kept coming to me, telling me to do something, suggesting plans to attack RiverClan. And I hated Heartstorm, hated him that because of what he did, ShadowClan were making my life harder. So I wanted to have my own revenge plan as well, on you." Cinderstar's eye pierced Heartstorm and he shuffled nearer to Silverdrop.

"Anyways," Cinderstar grunted. "I prepared my plan. My Clan was satisfied. I'm not a very violent person, I'm more you know..., smart, intelligent and down to earth." Heartstorm rolled his eyes.

"Continue," Reedpelt ordered coldly.

"Alright alright. So as I was saying, I did- do not like violence but I am smart and-" Cinderstar was cut off.

"Yes yes, we get it," said Thornstar impatiently.

"Right, well I can come up with a good plan. So I planned. ShadowClan kept pressuring me. And well, one day, I went to a Gathering, and I saw you," Cinderstar looked straight at Heartstorm who raised his eyebrows. "And well... let's jut put it this way, I didn't want to attack RiverClan. I told my deputy this. Clawpelt was enraged. He threw me out."

"This does not explain why you were always tired and

angry," Heartstorm pointed out.

"Does it not?" mocked Cinderstar. "Well use your brain. ShadowClan was getting angry, impatient that we were not doing anything. Everybody wanted to attack RiverClan but I didn't, you can thank me for that later. I had to stay up night, planning and thinking and honestly, I'm glad they chased me out. Wanted to be out of that foul place since forever."

"So are they going to attack? And when? What plans did you make?" asked Thornstar.

"Woah woah, calm down," Cinderstar said. "Honestly... I don't know. But Heartstorm, you see, you should be thanking me. For warning you, for not going on with my plan. It would have been brilliant." Cinderstar gazed into space.

"I'm not thanking you for anything," spat Heartstorm. Cinderstar snorted and looked away.

"Right," Thornstar said. "You're going to tell me everything. Silverdrop, Heartstorm, Reedpelt, you may go." The three cats made their way out. Heartstorm was glad for the fresh air and sunlight. It cleared his mind.

"You think she's crazy now?" whispered Silverdrop.

"Yes," nodded Heartstorm. Silverdrop rolled her eyes.

"I told you, those weren't empty threats," Silverdrop pointed out.

"Her Clan forced her to say that," Heartstorm frowned. "But yeah, I guess you were right. But can we trust her? I mean, look at her. She would do anything to save her won skin."

"Yeah, you're right. We shouldn't trust her. Not that I ever would," Silverdrop shivered. "She's horrible."

"She didn't use to be," sighed Heartstorm, thinking of the young and carefree warrior he used to know.

"ShadowClan really hates you," sighed Silverdrop. "You're in danger. We need to tell Thornstar about my dreams." Heartstorm snapped his head up.

"No," he said. "No."

"Heartstorm, you're in danger. I saw Blizzardkit, I saw him attacking you. Killing you," Silverdrop said.

"No, but Silverdrop, those dreams aren't real. Blizzardkit wouldn't be able to kill me. Did Blizzardkit and I look the same age in your dreams?" asked Heartstorm.

"Well..., sort of," Silverdrop frowned, thinking hard.

"Well, once Blizzardkit becomes a warrior, I'd be much older. We wouldn't look the same age. Look, Silverdrop, you promised not to tell anyone. I can take care of myself. And I don't want you to become a medicine cat," Heartstorm said sadly.

"But, what if you're wrong?" protested Silverdrop, her eyes filled with worry.

"I just want to spend the rest of my life with you. I just want to raise kits with you," pleaded Heartstorm.

Ch. 45

"I don't know why she's still here," spat Sparkbelly. "I'd have chased her out by now." Heartstorm agreed. He hated seeing Cinderstar in camp, it made him remember.

"Why doesn't Thornstar keep her in one den?" hissed Rabbitleap. "I hate seeing her around, walking as if she belongs here, as if she's welcomed."

"I'm about to talk to Thornstar about her," joined in Applenose. "I hate her attitude." Cinderstar had just been in RiverClan for a day but everybody hated her. They hadn't forgotten her threats and nobody trusted her. Heartstorm wondered why Thornstar still wanted to keep her. She had told them enough. He hated seeing her. He tried to avoid her as much as he could, training out of camp with Hawkpaw for as long as they could. Hawkpaw had bombarded him with questions but Heartstorm had managed to avoid most of them. Just then, Thornstar leapt onto the High Rock.

"All cats old enough to hunt fish in the river, gather around the High Rock for a Clan meeting," he called. Warriors poured out of the warrior's den. Heartstorm joined Silverdrop, Eelfrost and Deerflame.

"Do you think he's going to talk about Cinderstar?" asked Deerflame.

"Duh, she's the only thing we talk about these day," huffed Eelfrost then nudged Heartstorm. "Look at her, she looks as if she thinks she belongs here." Heartstorm peered through the crowd and spotted Cinderstar, grooming herself calmly by the High Rock. He snorted.

"As you all know, Cinderstar has come to RiverClan, seeking for help. She claims to be helping us," Thornstar announced. Cats growled and an outburst broke out at Thornstar's

last words. Thornstar flicked his tail and silence followed. "I do not believe her." There were cheers and Cinderstar's ears pricked. "But we are keeping her in camp. I know many of you do not like her walking around so she will from now on, be confined to the medicine den." Frogleap sprung to his feet.

"My den?" He cried outraged. "Come on, that's not fair!" Cinderstar scoffed.

"Frogleap," Thornstar said sternly, then turned to the Clan. "We will continue as usual but I want double patrols at the ThunderClan and WindClan border from now on. And Cinderstar will not be left alone. Reedpelt will arrange for someone to watch over her, you will take shifts." Heartstorm's jaw fell.

"What?" spat Eelfrost. "I'm not going to babysit the outcast ShadowClan leader."

"Hm," Silverdrop scoffed. "Reedpelt can try and let me watch her, I'll claw her eyes out before you can say ShadowClan." Heartstorm agreed. Deerflame seemed annoyed but didn't say anything.

"It's our duty," she pointed out. "We shouldn't complain. Everybody's in this together."

"Yeah, we're all into throwing Cinderstar out," said Eelfrost. Heartstorm chuckled.

"And as from now, the patrols will have no less than five cats," Thornstar said then dipped his head and leapt off the High Rock. Everywhere around them, cats were complaining or talking about the new rules. Hawkpaw trotted to Heartstorm.

"Are we having training today? Will I have to watch her?" Hawkpaw grimaced.

"No," assured Heartstorm then added under his breath, "I hope not."

"If I'm going to have to watch her, I'm going to die," huffed Eelfrost grumpily. Just then Reedpelt approached them.

"I know nobody is excited about the new rule but we all have to do this," he told them. Deerflame didn't say anything, she just nodded in understand. Silverdrop growled and Eelfrost sniggered.

"I won't be able to stand her. My eyes hurt when I look at her!" Eelfrost exclaimed. Deerflame nudged him angrily. Heartstorm tried to keep in his laughter.

"Heartstorm, I know you have an apprentice, so you will have less watch time," Reedpelt explained. Eelfrost's mouth dropped and he stared at Heartstorm.

"Wha?" he gaped. Heartstorm turned his laugh into a cough.

"Silverdrop, your shift is from dawn, for two hours. Eelfrost, yours is right after Silverdrop, two hours as well. Greyspeck is after Silverdrop, two hours. And after that, Deerflame you're up for two hours," Reedpelt told them. Deerflame nodded. "Heartstorm, yours will be tomorrow morning at sunrise, one hour."

"Do I have to as well?" asked Hawkpaw.

"No," Reedpelt told him. "You're lucky." Hawkpaw grinned. Reedpelt padded away.

"Ugh.... I have to waste my night, looking at the ugliest thing in the world," grumbled Eelfrost.

"Don't say that!" Deerflame exclaimed but she seemed disgruntled as well. Silverdrop groaned.

"I'm not going to survive," she moaned. Heartstorm nudged her gently.

"You'll be fine," he assured her.

"Says you," her tone sharp. "You don't need to do as much as us."

"I have to train Hawkpaw," grinned Heartstorm.

"You're lucky. Can I be a mentor?" Eelfrost sighed.

"Maybe, when Acornheart has her kits," said Deerflame.

"Acornheart is going to have kits?" exclaimed Heartstorm.

"Yeah," nodded Deerflame. "Didn't you hear?"

"What? Who's the father?" asked Eelfrost.

"Cloudbreeze," replied Deerflame.

"I never knew...," frowned Eelfrost.

"You wouldn't know," Deerflame said. "You don't ever listen. Cloudbreeze even told us at the last border patrol." Eelfrost frowned, thinking hard, trying to remember.

"Right well, I'll see you guys later," Heartstorm said and flicked his tail at Hawkpaw. "Let's go train." Hawkpaw trotted behind him. Heartstorm gave Silverdrop an affectionate lick as he passed her.

"Love you," he smiled.

"Me too," she smiled back. He felt his heart flutter and his thoughts were only on Silverdrop as he padded after Hawkpaw, his body feeling weirdly warm and fuzzy.

Ch. 46

Heartstorm woke up suddenly. Great, he thought, he was on duty. He heaved himself off his nest and stepped over sleeping warriors. He headed for the medicine den. The air was chilly but not cold. Heartstorm had been dreading his time with Cinderstar. As he entered the den, Sparkbelly saw him and a look of relief washed over Sparkbelly's face. He hurried to Heartstorm.

"Thank StarClan you're here, it was horrible," he said and rushed out. Heartstorm was left alone, staring into the medicine den, wondering what horrors awaited inside. He peered around the dim den and spotted Cinderstar, sprawled on two nests. He grimaced. Frogleap was nowhere to be seen. He sighed and sat down as far as he could from Cinderstar. He let himself doze off a a little but a noise awoke him.

"Ah, it's you, " came Cinderstar's voice. Heartstorm's head snapped up and he fixed his eyes on her.

"Yes, it's me," agreed Heartstorm coldly. He wanted to limit talking to Cinderstar as much as possible.

"You don't seem too happy," Cinderstar pointed out unnecessarily.

"Correct," Heartstorm nodded, regarding Cinderstar coldly.

"Why, is it because of me?" asked Cinderstar innocently. Heartstorm didn't bother looking at her. "What have I done to you?" Heartstorm rounded on her, barring his fangs.

"What have you done?" he repeated angrily. "You abandoned me, you banished me." Cinderstar raised her eyebrows.

"Shouldn't you be thanking me?" asked Cinderstar. Heartstorm hissed. "I mean, you do like RiverClan, don't you. Or do

you miss ShadowClan? Do you want to be ShadowClan? I thought you liked your new Clan?" Heartstorm growled but paused.

"I am RiverClan," he growled. Cinderstar raised her eyebrows.

"Mmm," Cinderstar nodded. Heartstorm settled down, his eyes on Cinderstar. He had never felt this much cold hatred before. What did she know? She thought it was alright to come dancing into his Clan, RiverClan and act as if everybody should be thanking her. She didn't even seem bothered about anything that she had done. He resented her for banishing him. But he was RiverClan now, he did not desire to return to ShadowClan. Cinderstar tried to spark a new conversation once more but Heartstorm ignored her. It gave him pleasure to see her getting mad when he didn't answer. Finally, Softcry entered the den. Heartstorm sighed in relief and, without glancing at Cinderstar, smiled at Softcry and padded out. He took deep gulps of fresh air and spotted Hawkpaw and Rosepaw together. He trotted to them. Rosepaw looked up and smiled.

"Hi Heartstorm. How was it?" asked Hawkpaw.

"Don't ask," smiled Heartstorm. "Ready to go?" Hawkpaw nodded.

"Bye," said Rosepaw.

"Where's Applenose?" Heartstorm asked Rosepaw.

"He's coming," Rosepaw told him. Heartstorm flicked his tail and trotted away with Hawkpaw behind him.

"What are we going to learn today?" asked Hawkpaw excitedly.

"I thought we should do a bit of swimming and fishing. It'll be too cold to swim soon," Heartstorm explained. Hawkpaw nodded enthusiastically. He was by far best at swimming.

"Can we race?" asked Hawkpaw.

"You know, I think you're ready to learn how to fight in

water," Heartstorm said. Hawkpaw's eyes widened.

"No way!" he exclaimed. "I get to learn to fight in the water?"

"Yes," Heartstorm nodded. "Normally, you won't be fighting in water but you are RiverClan so just knowing how to get along in the water is good." Hawkpaw nodded happily. He trotted faster than Heartstorm, pelting him with questions.

Heartstorm entered camp after a long day of training Hawkpaw. They had had a few fights in the water and Heartstorm found himself almost getting beaten by Hawkpaw. He had never really learnt much about fighting in the water. Blacktail had juts covered the basics with him a few times but he found them very useful indeed. He spotted Silverdrop by the elder's den, talking amiably to Pigeonfeather. Heartstorm found Pigeonfeather kind and amusing. He was a bright young cat and Heartstorm felt bad that he had had to retire so early. Pigeonfeather smiled at Heartstorm's approach.

"Hey," he said. "I heard that you and Silverdrop are mates." Silverdrop looked down with a small smile.

"Hey," grinned Heartstorm, nuzzling Silverdrop gently. He sat down, facing Pigeonfeather.

"Aw, you are both so cute," cooed Pigeonfeather. Heartstorm laughed.

"Thanks," he said.

"I used to like someone," the young elder sighed. "Snowfall. Remember her?" Silverdrop nodded, her eyes wet.

"I do," she said. "She was there when I first arrived.... my first friend." Heartstorm frowned. Silverdrop had never told him how she had come to ShadowClan. He looked at her, about to ask her but something about her face told him she didn't want to talk about it. So he kept silent.

"Yeah well..., she died a hero," sighed Pigeonfeather.

"She did," agreed Silverdrop. Heartstorm dipped his head in respect for his dead Clanmate.

"Well, it was nice talking to you," Pigeonfeather smiled sadly at Silverdrop and Heartstorm. "I'll see you later."

"Bye, it was great talking to you too," replied Silverdrop. Heartstorm smiled and padded away with Silverdrop.

"How was your day?" he asked her.

"Good," she smiled. "Yours?"

"Well, the morning wasn't too great but I got over it. I trained Hawkpaw in fighting in water. He's spectacular," Heartstorm said. "Did Cinderstar give you any problems?"

"I did," Silverdrop said and Heartstorm burst into laughter. Just then, Eelfrost raced towards Heartstorm. His eyes were shining.

"Hey, what's up?" asked Heartstorm, surprised.

"Heartstorm, I think I'm going to do it," Eelfrost said. Heartstorm raised an eyebrow.

"Do what?" asked Heartstorm.

"I'm going to-" Eelfrost whispered, eyeing Silverdrop. Silverdrop shrugged.

"I'll go," she said.

"No it's alright!" called Heartstorm but she was already walking away. Eelfrost waited till she was gone then turned to Heartstorm, his eyes shining and trembling with excitement.

"I'm going to tell Deerflame. That I like her," Eelfrost said. "What do you think she's going to say?"

"Eelfrost, you and Deerflame have been going on about each other to me. I'm one hundred percent sure that she likes you,"

Heartstorm said. "I mean, look at both of you. You were made for each other."

"I know right?" exclaimed Eelfrost elated. Heartstorm laughed.

"Do it," Heartstorm told Eelfrost. "You've waited long enough." Eelfrost squeaked and nodded. He closed his eyes and tried to calm down, took a deep breath and marched towards Deerflame who was talking to Stripedfur. Silverdrop rejoined Heartstorm.

"He's going to tell her I presume," Silverdrop guessed.

"Yeah," nodded Heartstorm. "Sorry about that."

"It's alright," Silverdrop said. They watched as Eelfrost asked Deerflame alone. They walked together some way away and Eelfrost seemed to be telling Deerflame something serious. Then Deerflame beamed and Eelfrost shot a grin at Heartstorm. Heartstorm returned it, feeling his heart fluttering for them. He was so happy Deerflame and Eelfrost were *finally* together.

"Ooh, they're going to be the new couple of the Clan, everybody will be talking about them for a moon," Silverdrop said with amusement. "Wanna eat?" Heartstorm nodded and followed Silverdrop to the fresh-kill pile. They shared a sparrow in the shade of a tree, talking and joking. Heartstorm wouldn't have asked for anything to be different.

Ch. 47

"Have you heard about Deerflame and Eelfrost?" asked Sparkbelly in a low voice to Heartstorm. They were on a patrol with Hawkpaw, Dustpaw and Mudclaw.

"Yeah, I have," nodded Heartstorm. It was time Sparkbelly got over Deerflame. ¨

"Is it true?" asked Sparkbelly, hoping it wasn't. "I mean, they're only rumours."

"Why don't you ask her?" suggested Heartstorm.

"I don't- you know her, so are they together?" asked Sparkbelly unsurely. Heartstorm didn't want to tell Sparkbelly. He thought it might be better for Deerflame to tell him. But Sparkbelly seemed to be begging Heartstorm for an answer so he tried to make up the easiest way to tell him.

"Well, Deerflame and Eelfrost um... *are* together," Heartstorm said which didn't seem to make Sparkbelly feel better. He hung his head.

"I knew it," he sighed.

"Well, um, there are other cats," Heartstorm said, trying to think of any other she-cats.

"Like who?" cried Sparkbelly dejectedly. "*You've* got Silverdrop. Deerflame is with Eelfrost. Acornheart has Cloudbreeze..."

"Hey, there's um.., there's Blacktail," suggested Heartstorm, grimacing at the same time.

"Blacktail?" repeated Sparkbelly. "She's too.... *old*." Heartstorm raised his eyebrows. Sparkbelly was right. Besides Blacktail and Rosepaw all the other she-cats were taken.

"I'm sure you'll find somebody," Heartstorm reassured, although he knew it was very unlikely. He felt bad for Sparkbelly. Sparkbelly hung his head sadly.

"I'll be alone for the rest of my life," he pouted.

"Well, I'm sure somebody will turn up," Heartstorm said, not believing it.

"Who?" sobbed Sparkbelly. "Rainfeather is with Reedpelt. Moorpelt is with Stripedfur. Softcry is with Embergaze, and he doesn't even talk! You're with Silverdrop and Eelfrost is with Deerflame... And I- I've got nobody." Just then, Mudclaw interrupted.

"A lot of us don't have anybody," he put in. "Applenose, Greypseck, you, Smallear, Smoketail and Beestripe." He shrugged. "We've reached the border, so stop pouting." Heartstom was glad for the distraction. Hawkpaw and Dustpaw ran ahead. The sky was grey and cloudy. The sun was nowhere to be seen. Heartstorm felt himself shivering as he gazed at the never ending moor. It stretched on forever. Heartstorm no longer longed to feel what it was like to run in the moor. He had already been on the moor and RiverClan territory was enough.

"Hawkpaw and Dustpaw can mark the border," Mudclaw said. "Let's check for any signs anybody has been past the border. Heartstorm looked around for anything which might suggest WindClan had crossed the border but he found nothing. He sniffed the air. It was cool and the scent of fresh rain lingered. He knew it would start raining anytime. He sighed, he hated rain. After making sure there was no sign of WindClan, the patrol headed back. Sparkbelly and Dustpaw broke from the patrol in the middle of the forest for some training but Heartstorm led Hawkpaw to the clearing with Hawkpaw. Reedpelt had asked to talk to Heartstorm at noon.

"I'll be in Thornstar's den," Heartstorm told Hawkpaw when they had reached camp. "I'll come and get you when I'm done." Hawkpaw nodded and headed for the apprentice den. Heartstorm lingered outside of the leader's den until Reedpelt joined him.

"We need to talk about Hawkpaw," he told Heartstorm. Heartstorm nodded, hoping it was nothing about his teaching. Thornstar called from inside.

"Reedpelt?" he said.

"Yes, it's us," Reedpelt said. They entered the den. Thornstar smiled at Heartstrom.

"Nothing to be worried about. We just like to talk to the mentors about their apprentice's learning, what they have achieved and where they are now, from time to time," assured Thornstar.

"Oh right," Heartstorm said in relief. "Hawkpaw is a great apprentice. He's going to be a great warrior, I know it." Reedpelt nodded. "He got a chance not to feed the elders, it was a training exercise we did with Sparkbelly and Dustpaw. And he won but he still wanted to feed the elders, said it was his responsibility." Heartstorm found it was easy to talk about Hawkpaw.

"He learns quickly. He had some problems with killing when hunting but now he understands it's for the good of the Clan. He's greatly improved in hunting. And he's amazing in water. He has the perfect technique, he can swim quickly, quietly and swiftly. His fishing is very good, improving with each practise. And we've just started fighting in water. He learned so quickly," Heartstorm said.

"How about his fighting?" asked Thornstar with a nod of approval.

"Very good. We need to broaden his knowledge of some skills but he would be able to take care of himself in a fight very well," nodded Heartstorm.

"He's going to be twelve moons in less than two moons, do you think he's going to be ready?" asked Reedpelt.

"Of course," Heartstorm nodded.

"Do you think you're going to give him a final assessment?" asked Thornstar.

"Well, I don't think the stress of knowing there will be an assessment will be necessary but I'll test him on different things over the course of a quarter moon when the time comes I think," Heartstorm explained. Reedpelt nodded in agreement.

"That's great, thank you," he nodded.

"Tell us when you think he is ready and feel free to talk about his improvement to us anytime," smiled Thornstar. "Thank you." Heartstorm dipped his head and headed out. He was going to train Hawkpaw to be the best warrior. Hawkpaw was nearly there, he was sure. He knew almost everything and Heartstorm knew that he would be able to teach Hawkpaw all he had to know to be able to become a true RiverClan warrior. Hawkpaw trotted up to Heartstorm.

"Ready to go?" asked Heartstorm.

"Sure," nodded Hawkpaw. They headed out of camp.

That night, Heartstorm lay in his nest, thinking about the happy things he'd love to happen in the future. Seeing Hawkpaw becoming a warrior and receiving his warrior's name. Joking and laughing with Deerflame and Eelfrost. And raising a family with Silverdrop. He fell into a dreamy sleep.

Ch. 48

Heartstorm was testing Hawkpaw on his swimming. The test, unknown to Hawkpaw, was to see if he was ready to become a warrior. Heartstorm was sure Hawkpaw would pass.

"Swim as quick as you can, remember technique," said Heartstorm. Hawkpaw slipped into the cold water. Leaf-fall had just began. The air was chilly and Heartstorm was testing Hawkpaw on everything to do with water as soon as possible so Hawkpaw wouldn't have to deal with the cold water when the weather was any colder. Heartstorm followed Hawkpaw down the river. Hawkpaw didn't seem to mind the cold. He kept swimming. Heartstorm noted that his position was perfect. He smiled happily. Hawkpaw finally got out of the water and shook himself.

"Let's do some hunting, good job with the swimming by the way," Heartstorm said. "Let's try and catch some birds." Heartstorm hoped Hawkpaw would be able to do this. He knew hunting was Hawkpaw's weak point but Hawkpaw nodded determinedly. They padded on dead leaves, a few leaves floating down to land in front of them.

"Only birds?" asked Hawkpaw.

"Let's aim for birds now," Heartstorm said. "Then we'll go to voles, mice, and stuff." Hawkpaw nodded. Heartstorm hoped he didn't suspect anything. He didn't want Hawkpaw to get worried. Heartstorm let Hawkpaw take the lead. They spotted a raven soon. Hawkpaw stalked forward, eyes fixed on it. Heartstorm watched, praying that Hawkpaw would be able to catch it. Hawkpaw leapt. He landed on the bird. It cawed and fluttered its wings. Hawkpaw should have already delivered the deadly death blow but he had hesitated and something in his eyes told Heartstorm he was not going to kill it.

"Hawkpaw, kill it," Heartstorm jumped to his feet. Hawkpaw grimaced and his grip on the birds slackened. Heartstorm

cringed. He would have to test Hawkpaw again on his hunting. And if he didn't improve in a quarter moon, his warrior ceremony would need to be postponed. Heartstorm had been looking forward to it. To see Hawkpaw's surprised but pleased face when Thornstar would call him up. The bird managed to fly out of Hawkpaw's paw.

"Hawkpaw!" shouted Heartstorm. Hawkpaw quickly lunged for it once more and caught it between his claws. Heartstorm closed his eyes, praying Hawkpaw wouldn't let it go. Hawkpaw bit into the bird's neck and it stopped cawing. Heartstorm sighed in relief, opening his eyes. He smiled and padded to Hawkpaw. He knew it wasn't the best catch but at least he had caught it.

"Sorry," murmured Hawkpaw, padding, head down to Heartstorm.

"It's alright," Heartstorm said, forcing a reassuring smile. "You'll do better next time. The thing I don't understand is..., you don't want to kill, or hurt your prey, but you're very talented and seem totally fine when it comes to fighting."

"It's just.., when I fight, I'm fighting for my Clan, right? And the cat I'm fighting probably deserves it.., like those ThunderClan cats...," Hawkpaw trailed off, Heartstorm knew he was thinking about Wolfstep. "I mean, if I'm fighting, I'll be fighting cats which deserve it. They're not innocent. But the prey.., the prey is innocent. I mean, they haven't hurt us, have they?" Heartstorm took some time to understand Hawkpaw but slowly nodded.

"Right well, you know when you're hunting it's for RiverClan. And you don't know if that prey is innocent, it might have gone and murdered its brother for all we know," Heartstorm said. Hawkpaw giggled. "Come on, let's try to catch some mice." Hawkpaw nodded and they buried the bird before continuing their search for a more prey.

Heartstorm was walking towards Eelfrost and Deerflame when Applenose trotted over to him.

"Hey Heartstorm, got a moment?" he asked. Heartstorm was caught off guard but nodded.

"Yeah sure, what's up?" asked Heartstorm.

"I'm sure Hawkpaw is reaching the time when he's going to become a warrior," Applenose said. "Rosepaw is as well. I don't think she's going to need any assessment, she's very good at everything, but I think a little more practise doing things with a partner would help. Do you think they could have a sort of last minute training together? Maybe Sparkbelly and Dustpaw could join as well." Heartstorm was taken aback but thought it was a wonderful idea. Hawkpaw needed it. He had trained a few more times with Sparkbelly in pair fishing and a bit of partner fighting but they had only brushed the surface. Heartstorm felt slightly bad that he hadn't thought of teaching Hawkpaw a bit more about partner hunting and fighting.

"That's a great idea!" exclaimed Heartstorm.

"When do you think Hawkpaw is going to be ready to become a warrior?" asked Applenose.

"I was going to suggest to Thornstar about his warrior ceremony in half a moon," Heartstorm told Applenose. "I've already started testing him today. But only with a bit of hunting. I think the test could wait though, we can train together a few days, starting tomorrow?" Applenose nodded.

"That sounds great," said Applenose. "I was thinking of Rosepaw to become a warrior in half a moon as well. They should have their ceremony together, you know." Heartstorm nodded. Sparkbelly and Heartstorm had already talked about the warrior ceremony for their apprentices together and they had already decided to have it together. Sparkbelly had decided to give Dustpaw a final assessment.

"Tomorrow dawn?" Applenose suggested.

"Perfect," agreed Heartstorm. "I'll tell Sparkbelly about it." Applenose nodded and padded away. Heartstorm turned away from Deerflame and Eelfrost, telling himself he'd join them later and headed for Sparkbelly. He found Sparkbelly talking with Silverdrop who looked disgruntled.

"Heartstorm!" she exclaimed, her eyes brightening. Heartstorm smiled back. Sparkbelly huffed and watched them as they nuzzled each other. "How was your day? I've got something to tell you later."

"Great, my day was great, thanks," said Heartstorm. "Hey Sparkbelly! Come back! I've got to tell you something!" Sparkbelly, who was turning away, padded to Heartstorm.

"Gotta go," Silverdrop said, glancing at the medicine den. "Cinderstar." Heartstorm grimaced and wished her luck. Sparkbelly raised his eyebrows at Heartstorm.

"Hawkpaw and Rosepaw are training tomorrow, for three days. You know, do some more partner work. So they'll be properly ready when they are warriors," Heartstorm explained. "Applenose and I were wondering if you and Dustpaw wanted to join." Sparkbelly thought for a moment.

"Maybe," he shrugged. "When?"

"At dawn," Heartstorm said. "It'll be good practise for them. They're all going to be becoming warriors on the same day afterall."

"Really?" Sparkbelly said. "I thought it was only Hawkpaw and Dustpaw."

"Yes but Applenose said he's going to get Rosepaw ready for her warrior ceremony in half a moon. Same time as our apprentices," said Heartstorm.

"Right, well then, we might join you tomorrow, no guarantees though," Sparkbelly said, tightlipped and he padded away. Heartstorm wondered what he had done to offend him. With a shrug he headed for Deerflame and Eelfrost. They were laughing at a joke, presumably by Eelfrost. They both beamed at Heartstorm when he joined them.

"So how was the first test with Hawkpaw?" asked Deerflame.

"His swimming was very good. Hunting..., well, he could work on it," Heartstorm said.

"You're not going to make him fail though," Eelfrost said. "Are you?"

"Of course not," Heartstorm said pointedly. "But he needs to be ready to become a warrior. Once you're a warrior, you don't really learn new fighting moves everyday so I've gotta teach him as many as I can now so he'll be well of when he's a warrior."

"You're totally right," Deerflame said. "I hope I get to mentor Acornheart's kits. It's very good experience. I mean, you can testify to that, can't you Heartstorm?" Heartstorm nodded.

"Well, I don't want to be mentoring Acornheart's kits," Eelfrost yawned. "I mean, I'd have to walk up at dawn as if I were an apprentice." Deerflame snorted.

"It's not too bad, and you shouldn't be so lazy, you know," Deerflame said.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not willing to give up my beauty sleep for-" Eelfrost stopped when Deerflame hit him on the head with her paw. "Ow. What was that for?"

"You've got to stop being so selfish," Deerflame said pointedly. "You know, you're lucky you have me. I have enough brains to share for the both of us." Heartstorm laughed but Eelfrost pouted.

"That's not true!" he protested. Deerflame raised her eyebrows.

"At least he isn't Sparkbelly," pointed out Heartstorm.

"Yes, well, that's true," nodded Deerflame.

"You know, you've got to lighten up a bit," Eelfrost said with a grin. Deerflame rolled her eyes.

"So when are you and Silverdrop going to have kits?"

asked Deerflame out of the blue. Heartstorm was caught by surprise and didn't know what to say.

"Sorry?" he frowned. Eelfrost nudged him playfully.

"Aw come on," he said. "You guys have been in love for like forever. *Everybody's* wondering when you're going to have kits." Heartstorm goggled at his best friends. Everybody? Everybody thought he and Silverdrop were going to have kits? He hadn't even realised that everybody knew they were together. He had only ever told Eelfrost, Deerflame and Sparkbelly.

"Heartstorm," Deerflame said gently. "Everybody knows. I mean, how could they not. Silverdrop literally talked to *nobody*. She was like, the bossy mysterious cat. And suddenly, she's always talking to you and you always twirl tails and smile at each other and it's *so* obvious." Heartstorm sighed. He supposed it must have been obvious.

"Well, we've talked about what we'd name our kits.., but not really... not in detail," Heartstorm said slowly. "I mean, I'm not sure if I should talk to her about it."

"You should," Eelfrost said quickly and Deerflame nodded in agreement.

"Oh guess what?" exclaimed Eelfrost. "I had to watch Cinderstar today for *two* hours. And you know what she told me?" Heartstorm and Deerflame stared at Eelfrost.

"What?" they both asked.

"Well," Eelfrost started, looking important. "I was trying to ignore her, falling asleep actually. And then she prods me on the head and she's like "wake up". And I snap at her and she's like "chill" and I'm just like "you chill". I mean, who is she to tell me to chill!?" Deerflame raised her eyebrows.

"We get it, continue please," Heartstorm said.

"Anyways, then we start talking. And she told me about Goldenheart. Some delusional psychopathic queen. Apparently her

kits, Blizzardkit and Birdkit, are like the big thing in the Clan," Eelfrost said. Heartstorm pricked his ears and frowned. Eelfrost had his full attention now.

"Goldenheart?" frowned Deerflame. "I think she was mentioned at some Gathering.."

"Yeah what did she say?" asked Heartstorm impatiently.

"Apparently this Goldenheart was the most hyped to get revenge on you. Something about you betraying Stormpelt and her. I mean, did you even talk to her?" Eelfrost said.

"Sometimes...," shrugged Heartstorm.

"Well, Goldenheart *hates* you," Eelfrost said. Heartstorm nodded. He knew that. "And Cinderstar said that every warrior in the Clan has taken up to be the kits' mentors. I mean, how weird is that? Having the whole Clan to be your mentor? I always knew ShadowClan was delusional."

"Continue," Heartstorm pressed.

"Right right. So apparently the kits are already learning how to fight at like three moons old. Or was it four?" Eelfrost frowned, looking into space.

"Yeah and?" Heartstorm said, losing patience.

"And apparently they're preparing.., well mostly Goldenheart is. Preparing these kits, Cinderstar said mostly Blizzardkit to get revenge on you," Eelfrost finished.

"But they're just kits! How could kits possibly hurt Heartstorm?" frowned Deerflame.

"Revenge on me?" Heartstorm frowned. It was impossible that Goldenheart could get kits to get revenge on him. And if they waited till they were warriors, Heartstorm would probably be old by then and Goldenheart even older, maybe even dead. But maybe it wasn't direct revenge on Heartstorm himself. Something dawned on Heartstorm.

"Woah," Eelfrost said, eyes wide. "I know that look."

"What look?" asked Heartstorm.

"I know it as well," Deerflame confirmed.

"You know something," Eelfrost said. "You've just realised something." Heartstorm tried to make a passive face .

"I- er, what?" stammered Heartstorm. Goldenheart knew many ways to get revenge on him. Many ways... Heartstorm gulped. He should have thought about it before. It wasn't all about him! She wanted to ruin his life as much as she could. She wouldn't achieve that by just killing him. And maybe the whole of ShadowClan was into her plan. Heartstorm shook his head, his brain reeling with thoughts.

"Heartstorm, what's wrong?" asked Deerflame.

"Heartstorm..," Eelfrost said. "You ok?" Heartstorm nodded feebly and got to his feet. He rushed to the medicine den. He had to talk to Silverdrop. He burst into the den, scaring Silverdrop and making Cinderstar hiss.

"Oh it's you," said Cinderstar with disdain. Silverdrop growled at Cinderstar and snapped at her to shut up.

"What's wrong?" she asked Heartstorm.

"Silverdrop. Those dreams," Heartstorm panted. Thoughts were clouding his mind.

"Clam down," Silverdrop said soothingly, letting Heartstorm sit down on the cold floor. Cinderstar regarded them with slight amusement.

"Finally realising something, are you? How long did it take for you to piece it up?" Cinderstar mocked. Heartstorm leapt to his feet, lashing his tail and hissing angrily.

"*You*! Shut up! Shut up!" he yelled. Cinderstar backed away. Silverdrop frowned.

"Heartstorm, calm down, are you alright? What happened?" asked Silverdrop. Heartstorm took a deep breath.

"The cat you saw, in your dreams. The one fighting Blizzardkit," Heartstorm said. He was aware that Cinderstar was listening hard in the corner of the den. He growled at her and padded out of the den.

"Heartstorm, I can't go out. I need to watch Cinderstar," Silverdrop said. Heartstorm beckoned her out anyway. Greyspeck was passing and Heartstorm snapped at him.

"Come here!" he said. Greyspeck approached. "Guard Cinderstar, will you?" Greyspeck opened his mouth to protest but Heartstorm was marching away, dragging Silverdrop behind him.

"What is it?" she asked him gently when they had settled down behind a bush.

"Silverdrop, the dreams you had. The cat fighting with Blizzardkit, you know, *me*. How did he look like? I mean, was he really *me*?" Heartstorm asked. Silverdrop frowned, thinking hard.

"Well yeah.. I mean, he did. I mean I see it from some distance and they're always fighting so I can't see every detail. They're always moving. Why?" Silverdrop asked.

"Just try and remember. Was there anything about the cat Blizzardkit was fighting different?" asked Heartstorm.

"No no. Not that I can-" Silverdrop stopped abruptly. "Wait.., now that I think about it, he had a silver patch on his shoulder and his eyes were lighter.., bluish. Heartstorm! The cat fighting Blizzardkit in my dreams isn't you!" She beamed. "It's not you! That's great! It means- it means, it going to be alright." Heartstorm though, did not share her thoughts. He looked down sadly. At least he had figured it out before any damage could be done.

"Goldenheart... and ShadowClan, want revenge on me. And they'll do this by killing, destroying everything I love in my life.

You..., my friends... and if we did have, our kits," Heartstorm said. "Maybe what you're seeing in your dreams is our kit. But now that we know, we can prevent that. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. But if we have kits.., I know Goldenheart, ShadowClan, will seek revenge on them." Silverdrop's eyes glistened with tears and a look of horror crossed her face.

"Silverdrop..," Heartstorm's heat dropped. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry we can't have kits... I didn't- I don't- I just.. I'm sorry. But if we do... Goldenheart... Stormpelt. They'll kill them." Silverdrop dropped her head.

"Heartstorm... the thing I wanted to tell you earlier," Silverdrop whispered hoarsely. "I'm pregnant."

Ch. 49

Applenose was giving Rosepaw and Hawkpaw instructions. They were fishing in the river together. Heartstorm stood back, lost in his thoughts. Silverdrop was going to have their kits. It was great but... Heartstorm was sure that the cat dying in Silverdrop's dream was his kit. He closed his eyes. He didn't want his kit to die. But there was nothing they could do now. Maybe.., Heartstorm hoped, the kits would not at all look like the cat fighting Blizzardkit in Silverdrop's dream. Maybe Silverdrop's dreams weren't even true.

"That was good for today. Take a break and we'll do some partner fighting," Applenose called out to the apprentices. They scampered away, laughing.

"Hey," Applenose said, sitting beside Heartstorm. "You're not very.. involved."

"Yeah um thanks for training them," Heartstorm said. "Not really in the mood today." Applenose raised his eyebrows.

"You can't always be in the mood," he said rather coldly.

"Sorry," muttered Heartstorm. His mind was whirling with possibilities. He wanted to have kits. Silverdrop's news would have been great.... but not now that he knew his kits.., everything he loved was in danger. He hoped more than all that ShadowClan wouldn't attack them. He hoped Cinderstar was lying. Who could trust her anyways?

"Right. Why don't I take care of their training today," Applenose suggested. "You go back to camp, rest or do whatever you need to do." Heartstorm nodded gratefully. He slunk back to camp and into the warrior's den. It was empty. He slumped into his nest. Suddenly, he smelt a familiar smell and looked up.

"Morning," Silverdrop said gently.

"Hey," Heartstorm forced a small smile.

"You can't know that the cat Blizzarkit is fighting in my dreams is our kits. Don't get worked up about it," Silverdrop said. "There's nothing you could do, even if it was true." Silverdrop frowned. "Don't feel bad alright. This is what we wanted. To raise kits." Heartstorm knew Silverdrop was right. He took a deep breath.

"When are you having the kits?" asked Heartstorm lightly. He glanced at Silverdrop's stomach. It was slightly bulging. His heat skipped a beat, thinking of their kits. He shuffled nearer to her and she leaned her head on his shoulder.

"In a moon and a half," smiled Silverdrop. Heartstorm smiled back.

"When will you have to go sleep in the nursery?" he asked. "I'll sleep there with you, if you like." Silverdrop chuckled.

"I don't think Frogleap or Acornheart would like it," she said.

"Acornheart?" repeated Heartstorm.

"You didn't know? She moved in yesterday. She's having her kits in like half a moon," said Silverdrop.

"Oh right," Heartstorm said. "So, what should we name them. For real."

"I told you already. Bumblekit and...," Silverdrop nodded to Heartstorm, "Brightkit."

"What if they're only she-cats?" asked Heartstorm.

"I know *so* many she-cat names," beamed Silverdrop. "Mistkit, Mintkit, Bloomkit, Flowerkit, Briarkit..." Heartstorm's thoughts flickered to Briarkit. A ShadowClan kit now resting in StarClan because of a ThunderClan warrior. Heartstorm shuddered. He should have saved her.

"You alright?" asked Silverdrop.

"Yeah yeah," Heartstorm assured her. They amused themselves by coming up with names for their kits till they dozed off, leaning on each other.

Heartstorm entered the dim den. He hated having to guard Cinderstar. He never talked to her. And although she tried to talk to him, he ignored her. Today, Cinderstar was snoring. Heartstorm watched in disdain, making himself comfortable on the far side of the den. The air was warm and stuffy inside and the overpowering smell of herbs made Heartstorm want to sneeze. He already longed to feel the sunshine on his pelt and see the blue sky. But no, he was stuck in the medicine den with Cinderstar. Cinderstar blinked open an eye.

"Oh no, *you*," she said pointedly. Heartstorm kept quiet, not even looking at her, pretending she didn't exist. "Ignoring me again, are you?" Cinderstar slowly sat up and shook herself. Her eyes weren't red anymore. She had had enough rest now. Her eyes were soft and amber, like they used to be. But Heartstorm knew not to be tricked. But he couldn't help but look at her. She was totally different. Her fur was smooth and well groomed. She had no cuts or fur missing. Her eyes were not bloodshot but beautiful and amber as they used to be and her posture was straight.., not slanted. She had changed so much. Almost back to the normal Cinderstar Heartstorm remembered. But he still didn't talk to her.

"You know. This isn't going to work out if you don't talk to me," Cinderstar pointed out. Only her voice remained the same. Mocking, cold and taunting. Heartstorm didn't want it to work out! What made Cinderstar think that Heartstorm wanted to make up with Cinderstar? He didn't want anything to do with her.

"You can't keep silent forever," Cinderstar continued. Yes I can, thought Heartstorm indignantly. He almost opened his mouth to retort to her but remained calm and collected. He tried to think of something happy. Like going to the stream with Silverdrop, laughing with her. Then showing their kits how to swim, splashing around with them, laughing. Heartstorm's heart warmed as he thought about this. He could imagine Silverdrop's eyes, shining,

beautiful. His kits' laughs.

"Ooh, something making you happy?" mocked Cinderstar. Heartstorm snapped out of his happy thoughts and was immediately pulled back to the cruel reality that he was stuck in a den with Cinderstar.

"Shut up!" snapped Heartstorm. He couldn't hold it in anymore. He leapt to his feet, fur bristling. "Just shut up!" Cinderstar's no longer gentle eyes now shone with victory.

"Ah, you finally talk," Cinderstar said. "You know, I wanted to tell you something. Thornstar would be interested."

"I don't care. Go tell him then," snapped Heartstorm. He didn't want to hear anything about ShadowClan and their secrets and lies anymore. He wasn't ShadowClan anymore. Why did they have to haunt him even when they were so far apart, not even sharing borders?

"But I thought you'd want to know first," Cinderstar said with disappointment. Heartstorm rolled his eyes.

"I don't care about ShadowClan," spat Heartstorm. "Whatever you tell me about them. I don't care and I don't need to know." Cinderstar shrugged and lay back down. Heartstorm took a deep breath. He could survive, just a bit longer. But it seemed as if he had been stuck in the den for hours. He sighed and lay down, his eyes fixed at the spot Cinderstar lay in. Suddenly a cat bustled in. Heartstorm leapt to his feet. Saved at last. It wasn't too bad, he thought. The cat was Frogleap.

"Oh, hello," he said to Heartstorm, not even glancing at Cinderstar. "I'm sorry if I got your hopes up. I'm just getting some herbs for Acornheart." Heartstorm slumped back to the ground. He didn't look up as Frogleap trotted out of the den again. Heartstorm's thoughts flickered from this to that. Time seemed to be stretching so long. Hours and hours Heartstorm must have been in that den when finally, another cat entered. And it wasn't Frogleap. Heartstorm sprung to his feet. It was Greyspeck.

"Thanks StarClan," sighed Heartstorm in relief. "Gosh I must have been in here for hours." Greyspeck eyed Cinderstar angrily then turned back to Heartstorm.

"You only need to watch her for an hour. I've got to watch her for two. Plus, last time you dragged me in here when you and Silverdrop ran off to do StarClan knows what," Greyspeck said grumpily. Heartstorm looked down embarrassed. He remembered faintly pushing Greyspeck into the den with Cinderstar when he had had to talk to Silverdrop privately.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Good luck then bye." He shot out of the den. Relishing the fresh breeze. It ruffled his pelt. He took deep gulps of fresh air and sighed in relief. And he didn't worry about ShadowClan anymore. He was determined not to let them haunt him. How could he have let them scare him when they hadn't talked to each other and didn't even share the same border. He was going to be happy. Silverdrop was having their kits! Nothing could be better than that. He wasn't going to let ShadowClan ruin this. With a brave smile, he headed to find Silverdrop.

Ch. 50

Heartstorm trotted towards Thornstar, feeling elated. He couldn't help but beam at Thornstar and Reedpelt as he approached them.

"Hawkpaw has passed all tests," smiled Heartstorm. "He's ready to be a warrior." Thornstar nodded approvingly and Reedpelt smiled.

"I'm just waiting to hear the results for Sparkbelly and Applenose but I'm sure Rosepaw and Dustpaw did very well as well. Expect Hawkpaw to become a warrior this evening at the latest," Thornstar said. Heartstorm let out a sigh of relief and smiled before trotting off to tell his best friends and Silverdrop the news. He headed for the nursery first. He trotted inside, greeting Acornheart who was lazily stretched out on the soft sand.

"Hey," smiled Silverdrop. "Did Hawkpaw pass?"

"Of course," smiled Heartstorm. "He's becoming a warrior today." Silverdrop smiled happily.

"That's great," she breathed. Heartstorm nuzzled her lovingly.

"So um, how are you feeling?" asked Heartstorm, eyeing Silverdrop's bulging belly.

"Great," Silverdrop said. "I mean, it's nice relaxing. In my own den. Acornheart's sleeping most of the time... It's nice and calm here." Heartstorm beamed.

"That's great," he said. "You alright? Do you need anything? Water? Food? I can go hunt something fresh right now." Silverdrop laughed.

"It's fine," she said. "Don't worry about me. You're getting all worked up, it's so cute."

"Sorry," gushed Heartstorm. "I just- never, you know.."

"Yeah, well go tell Deerflame and Eelfrost the news," said Silverdorp. "I'll see you tonight." Heartstorm nodded, gave Silverdrop a small lick on cheek before trotting out. He headed for his best friends. Deerflame was eating a mouse but Eelfrost was nowhere to be seen.

"So, what's the news?" asked Deerflame.

"Hawkpaw is becoming a warrior today," grinned Heartstorm. He couldn't believe it. He had grown to be so fond of Hawkpaw. He was a bit like his son. He was so proud that Hawkpaw was becoming a warrior, he couldn't really believe it himself.

"That's great!" cried Deerflame. "You did a wonderful job mentoring him. I bet he's going to be as good a warrior as you." Heartstorm took it as a compliment and beamed. Knowing Hawkpaw would become a warrior was almost the proudest day of his life. He wondered if he should go tell Stripedfur and Moorpelt. He wanted to tell everybody but he knew it had to be a secret so it could be a surprise to Hawkpaw.

"Acornheart's having her kits soon. I'm praying I'll get to mentor them," said Deerflame.

"Thornstar would be stupid not to choose you," said Heartstorm. Just then Applenose and Sparkbelly walked up to Heartstorm.

"Hey," grinned Sparkbelly. "Dustpaw's becoming a warrior!" Heartstorm grinned back.

"So is Hawkpaw! Today! I can't believe it," Heartstorm cried. Applenose nodded.

"Rosepaw has learnt a lot," he nodded. "Right, I've got to go." Applenose padded away, leaving Heartstorm, Sparkbelly and Deerflame to chat. Eelfrost joined them, jumping in the air when Heartstorm told him the good news.

"Of course he passed," Eelfrost said. "Even if he was bad, you'd pass him, wouldn't you?"

"Eelfrost," warned Deerflame but Heartstorm just laughed.

"He wouldn't be bad, I am his mentor," Heartstorm replied.

"Hey," Sparkbelly called. "Thornstar's on the High Rock. Heartstorm felt his heart race and he quickly trotted up to the High Rock. Reedpelt beckoned him to the side of the High Rock where he stood with Applenose and Frogleap.

"Sparkbelly," called Reedpelt. Sparkbelly turned to them and rushed to their side. Heartstorm scanned the clearing for Hawkpaw. He spotted him next to Moorpelt and Stripedfur. He grinned. Hawkpaw tilted his head at him in confusion.

"All cats old enough to fish in the river, please gather beneath the High Rock for a Clan gathering," Thornstar called. A crowd surrounded the High Rock and Heartstorm spotted Hawkpaw among them.

"Today is a happy day. For today, we have apprentices who have been deemed ready to become warriors," announced Thornstar. Heartstorm say Hawkpaw's eyes fly open and Moorpelt nudged Hawkpaw excitedly but Hawkpaw shook his head. Heartstorm narrowed his eyes, Hawkpaw would be surprised.

"Rosepaw, Dustpaw and Hawkpaw, please come up," Thornstar called. Hawkpaw's eyes flew wide and Stripedfur squealed. Moorpelt pushed Hawkpaw forward, his eyes shining with pride and happiness. Dustpaw was given a quick grooming from Stripedfur and Rosepaw marched up before any of her parents could touch her. She puffed out her chest, looking confident.

"I, Thornstar, leader of RiverClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a warrior in their turn," Thornstar declared then

turned to Rosepaw. "Rosepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" Rosepaw took a deep breath.

"I do," she replied strongly. Heartstorm saw Applenose beside him stiffen and he spotted Moorpelt and Stripedfur beaming with pride.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Rosepaw, from this moment on you will be known as Rosebriar. StarClan honours your courage and strength and we welcome you as a full warrior fo RiverClan," Thornstar said, touching his muzzle to Rosebriar's forehead. Rosebriar grinned from ear to ear, her eyes lit up with joy. Stripedfur and Moorpelt were sort of dancing on the spot. Heartstorm watched eagerly, waiting for his apprentice, to, in turn, become warrior. But Thornstar turned to Dustpaw next and Heartstorm heard Sparkbelly stifle a cry of joy.

"Do you, Dustpaw, promise to uphold the warrior code and defend and protect your Clan even at the cost of your life?" Thornstar asked. Dustpaw nodded then realised he needed to say "I do."

"I do," he said in a rush. Heartstorm heard Sparkbelly let out a nervous laugh.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name, Dustpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Dustclaw. RiverClan honours your determination and encouragement," Thornstar said with a smile then bent down to rest his muzzle Dustclaw's forehead. Dustclaw puffed out his chest and turned to the crowd, eyeing his parents then winked. The crowd gave a small chuckle. Then Thornstar turned to Hawkpaw. Heartstorm's heart seemed to skip a beat and he took a step forward to see better. He felt as if he couldn't be any prouder. Hawkpaw glanced at Heartstorm, his eyes sparkling with joy then turned back to Thornstar. Heartstorm nodded his encouragement.

"Hawkpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend and protect your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Thornstar demanded. Hawkpaw took a deep breath, surveyed the crowd of cats beneath him, resting his gaze on his parents who nodded encouragement, then turned around to look at Heartstorm. Heartstorm met his gaze, strong and determined. Wolfstep would have been so proud. Heartstorm gave a small nod and Hawkpaw looked back at Thornstar. Hawkpaw had been the only apprentice to look back at his mentor and parents for approval.

"Yes," Hawkpaw said, his voice strong, "I do." Heartstorm felt as if something was caught in his throat and he felt his eyes water. He gave a feeble smile.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Hawkpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Hawkflight. RiverClan honours your strong loyalty, your resilience and your determination in everything you do," Thornstar told Hawkpaw. Heartstorm let out a small proud laugh. Thornstar touched his muzzle to Hawkpaw's forehead then turned to the crowd. They burst to cheers.

"Hawkflight! Rosebriar! Dustclaw! Hawkflight! Rosebriar! Dustclaw!" The cheered. Heartstorm joined in, yelling his apprentice's name as loud as he could. Rosebriar and Dustclaw were lost in the crowd but Hawkflight pushed through to meet Heartstorm. He was beaming and his eyes were shining.

"I'm a warrior!" he exclaimed. Heartstorm chuckled.

"Yeah," he nodded, unable to speak. "Yeah, you are."

"Wolfstep, would be proud," Heartstorm said. "He is. He is proud." Hawkflight smiled and looked up at the sky.

"You think he's up there, watching me?" asked Hawkflight.

"Yeah, yeah he is," Heartstorm nodded. "I know he is."

Ch. 51

Cloudbreeze was pacing outside the nursery, looking extremely ruffled. His face was troubled and his brow deepened with every second. Heartstorm stood beside the nursery, listening carefully. Acornheart was kitting and giving awful screams. Heartstorm couldn't imagine what it was like for Acornheart. And for Cloudbreeze, having to wait outside, not being able to do anything.

"She's going to be fine," assured Heartstorm just as another shriek erupted from the nursery. He cringed at his words. "Frogleapt is with her."

"I know I know... but why can't *I* be with her?" Cloudbreeze said in despair. Moorpelt joined them nervously.

"She'll be alright," he told Cloudbreeze, not looking so sure himself. He smiled at Heartstorm.

"Why can't I go in?" Cloudbreeze said angrily. He huffed and burst into the nursery. Moorpelt raised his eyebrows.

"He's going to be kicked out any moment now," Moorpelt said. They heard Frogleap yelling angrily then another scream but Cloudbreeze seemed to have been allowed to stay inside. Moorpelt shuddered.

"Agh," he said. "I can't take this anymore..." He padded away. Heartstorm waited, he wanted to see the newborn kits and Silverdrop. Heartstorm spotted Hawkflight trotting towards him. He beamed at him.

"How is Acornheart doing?" asked Hawkflight. A painful cry rang out. Hawkflight cringed.

"She'll- she'll be fine," nodded Heartstorm, his brow furrowed. "So, how was the vigil?"

"Cold," shivered Hawkflight. "Um Heartstorm.., you were a great mentor, you know." Heartstorm smiled gently.

"Thank you," he said.

"I just- it's weird being a warrior. I mean, I don't have to wake up wondering what I'm going to learn today because well- I've already learnt everything!" Hawkflight said.

"Don't worry, ask Reedpelt to go on a couple patrols. When you get a hang of it, you can lead a few patrols then you'll understand what it's like to be a warrior," Heartstorm told him. He remembered when he had just started being a warrior. It had been so weird. He had felt exactly like Hawkflight.

"Thanks Heartstorm, I'll start with that," Hawkflight nodded and tried to peer into the nursery. Frogleap barked at Hawkflight to get out.

"Sorry Frogleap," muttered Hawkflight. "I'll see you then Heartstorm. I'm going on a patrol." Hawkflight trotted away. Finally, Acornheart's wailing stopped and there was some murmuring. Then Frogleap burst out of the nursery. Another job done. He looked down at Heartstorm who was waiting at the den entrance, unsure whether to go inside.

"Well?" asked Frogleap. "What are you waiting for?" Heartstorm let out a breath of relief and slipped into the den. The floor was warm and sandy and the whole place seemed like a nice comfortable place. There was some quiet wailing. Heartstorm slowly padded nearer to Cloudbreeze who was crouched over Acornheart. He peered over Cloudbreeze and spotted two little kits. They were so tiny and hadn't even opened their eyes yet. Heartstorm's heart melted. Silverdrop was by Acornheart's side, smiling at the kits. Heartstorm slipped beside her and lay down to watch the new kits.

"They're beautiful," murmured Heartstorm. Acornheart looked up and beamed, her eyes shining.

"Thank you," she whispered. Cloudbreeze sunk to the

ground, giving a nervous chuckle.

"I'm glad you're alright...," he said.

"What should we name them?" asked Acornheart. Heartstorm turned to Silverdrop.

"They're both she-cats," she told him. Heartstorm nodded. He looked closer. One of them was white with patches of brown. The other was a brown tabby kit. They were both so cute.

"I was thinking Daisykit, for this one," said Acornheart, nodding to the white and brown kit. Heartstorm thought it was perfect and so did Silverdrop. She let out a little gasp.

"That's perfect," Silverdrop gushed. Heartstorm looked at Silverdrop in amusement. He had never seen her so obsessed and amazed by something.

"Thank you," beamed Acornheart. "Do you want to name the other?"

"Sure but..., if you want to, I don't mind," Cloudbreeze said, looking in awe and love at his new kits.

"You name her," Acornheart nudged. Cloudbreeze nodded.

"I thought um, Heatherkit was nice," Cloudbreeze said.

"It's perfect," Acornheart said delighted. "Daisykit and Heatherkit, welcome to RiverClan. Just then, there was some low talking at the entrance den and Heartstorm looked up. Thornstar padded in. His eyes were bright.

"Congratulations Acornheart, Cloudbreeze," Thornstar nodded, bending down to see the kits. "Two healthy little kits. Have you decided on their names?"

"Yes, this one is Daisykit and this one is Heatherkit," Acornheart said.

"They're beautiful names," Thornstar dipped his head and

backed out of the nursery. Soon, many cats had one by one, come in to say congratulations to Acornheart and Cloudbreeze and to see the kits. Finally, Frogleap pushed into the den.

"Right, Greyspeck, get out, they've had enough visitors for one day," boomed Frogleap. Greyspeck scurried out. Frogleap laid his eyes on Heartstorm, opened his mouth as if to say something but closed it again.

"You say whatever you need to say to Silverdrop and out," Frogleap snapped with narrowed eyes. Heartstorm nodded. Frogleap stalked out.

"Scary, isn't he?" Cloudbreeze said, wide-eyed.

"Cloudbreeze has always been scared of Frogleap. He'd never ever go against Frogleap," Acornheart told Heartstorm and Silverdrop. "Except today." Cloudbreeze gave a small smile.

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow," Heartstorm said to Silverdrop and brushed his tail on her back. "Get some rest, alright?" Silverdrop nodded and smiled, giving him a small lick on the cheek. He backed out of the den.

"Congratulations again, Acornheart, Cloudbreeze. Daisykit and Heatherkit are going to be great RiverClan warriors," Heartstorm said before backing out of the den. Eelfrost and Deerflame hurried to him.

"Did you see them?" asked Deerflame excitedly.

"Frogleap stopped us from going in when Greyspeck came out," added Eelfrost sourly.

"Yeah I did. They're both she-cats. One is white with brown patches, her name is Daisykit and the other is a brown tabby, her name is Heatherkit," Heartstorm said.

"Aww, what cute names," Deerflame said.

"Well, I've got a hunting patrol to go to," said Deerflame, nodding to a group of cats gathered by the camp entrance. "See you

guys later." When Deerflame had gone Eelfrost and Heartstorm walked together.

"I had to guard Cinderstar this morning," Eelfrost said. "And..." Eelfrost poured into a long rant about Cinderstar and how boring it had been. Heartstorm had not seen Reedpelt to ask for his shift and was happy as well. Now that he was no longer a mentor, he'd have to guard Cinderpelt for two hours. He didn't like the idea of it.

"Hey, since you're not a mentor anymore, you have to do two hours now!" Eelfrost exclaimed.

"Shhh," Heartstorm warned, looking around. "I don't want to. Let's get out of here before Reedpelt can tell me when my shift is." Eelfrost laughed but when Heartstorm turned out to be serious, they both snuck out of camp. They talked and joked more freely, walking by the river bank. Eelfrost even pushed Heartstorm into the river a few times and Heartstorm took his revenge by dragging Eelfrost in as well. They burst out of the cold water, sputtering madly but laughing. Heartstorm hauled himself up, shaking water everywhere. He collapsed to the ground, shaking with laughter. It felt so good to just laugh with no care in the world.

Ch. 52

Heartstorm knew the time would come when he'd be Cloudbreeze, pacing the nursery worriedly. Heartstorm dreaded the moment. He couldn't imagine Silverdrop crying in pain. He slipped into the nursery. He heard Heatherkit and Daisykit wailing and Acornheart trying to comfort them. He smiled at Silverdrop. She beamed back.

"Fancy a walk?" she said, eyeing the kits. Heartstorm looked unsurely at her bulging stomach. She rolled her eyes.

"I can still walk," she muttered. "And if you don't want to go on a walk with me, I'll go alone."

"Sorry," Heartstorm murmured. "Let's go." They padded out of the den and slipped under the tunnel. Silverdrop relished the fresh air, taking deep breaths and looking around at the scenery.

"It's horrible, cooped up in there," shuddered Silverdrop. "And those kits crying, it's driving me crazy."

"The nursery seems really comfortable," remarked Heartstorm, trying to make Silverdrop feel better. She huffed.

"I can't imagine being in the nursery for more than five moons," said Silverdrop. "Are you alright? You seem distracted." Heartstorm had been thinking about their future.

"What? Oh nothing," he said. "There must be *some* good in being in the nursery."

"Oh yes, of course, I don't need to guard Cinderstar anymore," Silverdrop said with a small smile.

"Oh right," Heartstorm said bitterly, thinking about Cinderstar. Being in the medicine den with her drove him crazy. He couldn't imagine how it was for her, but he didn't care how she felt in there either.

"Is she being decent to you?" asked Silverdrop kindly and looking worried. "I hope she's not tormenting you with things from ShadowClan."

"Nah, don't worry about me. I can handle her," Heartstorm assured Silverdrop. He had gotten used to just ignoring Cinderstar. "Just..., rest." Silverdrop glared at him defiantly.

"I'm just fine," she told him, holding her head high.

"I'm sure you are," Heartstorm sighed. "But you know.., you still have to rest." Silverdrop ignored him. They kept walking, listening to the calming sound of nature. Then Deerflame and Eelfrost appeared, talking. Heartstorm grinned at Eelfrost.

"Hey," beamed Deerflame. Her eyes flew to Silverdrop's stomach. Heartstorm knew she was going to say something about her walking around when she was so close to kitting. "It's very good that you're not letting the fact that you're going to have kits, stop you from going out of camp. I can't *imagine* being in the nursery the whole day! I'm glad *you* see sense." Heartstorm gaped and Eelfrost didn't seem so sure.

"Why thank you!" exclaimed Silverdrop, giving Heartstorm a "I told you so" look. "It's so dull being in the nursery, not being able to do anything. You're totally right." Deerflame smiled, walking side by side with Silverdrop. They walked forward away from Heartstorm and Eelfrost.

"Deerflame is driving me mad," Eelfrost said under his breath as he and Heartstorm walked side by side.

"Really?" asked Heartstorm.

"I mean, she's great and all..., but she keeps saying I should act more mature. I mean, I'm as mature as it gets," Eelfrost said. Heartstorm burst out laughing but Eelfrost pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes.

"It's not funny!" he protested. "I am mature! Tell me I'm mature. Deerflame can't be right!"

"You are as mature as you'll get," Heartstorm nodded seriously. Eelfrost sighed in relief.

"Hey, what does that mean?" he exclaimed suddenly realising what Heartstorm could have meant.

"I'm just saying," grinned Heartstorm.

"You know, I've been thinking, what if ShadowClan attack us?" asked Eelfrost suddenly looking nervous.

"I know they hate me but they're like on the other side of us. We'll be fine," Heartstorm reassured, although he wasn't so sure himself. He had tried not to think about it. There was no point in worrying about something which might not happen.

"I know but what if Cinderstar is right and they're actually hatching a plan to attack us right now?" pressed Eelfrost.

"I've never seen you so scared," teased Heartstorm although he felt slightly scared as well. "Cinderstar said she was helping them make a plan, but in the end she left... She probably never finished it or showed it to any of them. We'll be fine."

"Yeah," echoed Eelfrost. "Plus, we have doubled the patrols." Heartstorm nodded satisfied. Just then, a border patrol burst into view. Sparkbelly, Embergaze, Rosebriar and Softcry were in the parol. Softcry shot a look at Eelfrost and as Sparkbelly passed, he gave Eelfrost a weird look. The rest of the patrol nodded to Heartstorm and Eelfrost in greeting. Eelfrost watched Sparkbelly trot away.

"What's with Sparkbelly?" Eelfrost said confusedly.

"You know he liked Deerflame," Heartstorm said.

"Liked?" frowned Eelfrost.

"Well, can't you see him brushing up with Rosebriar?" said Heartstorm. Sparkbelly had been staring at Rosebriar everytime Heartstorm saw him.

"I didn't notice," said Eelfrost.

"He's always with her," said Heartstorm. "You don't need to worry about him and Deerflame anymore."

"she'd never be with him!" exclaimed Eelfrost. "She said so anyways."

"Hurry up guys," called Deerflame. Silverdrop looked smug as Heartstorm and Eelfrost hurried up to catch up.

"Let's head back," said Silverdrop. They trouped back towards camp.

"I told you I could manage," huffed Silverdrop. Heartstorm thought she looked slightly tired but he didn't comment. Instead, he slowed his pace. She seemed slightly grateful but Heartstorm might have mistaken her. They entered camp. Heartstorm immediately spotted Sparkbelly, watching Rosebriar talking with Greyspeck. He looked slightly. Eelfrost had noticed as well and sniggered.

"I told you!" Heartstorm said under his breath. Eelfrost laughed. They padded towards the nursery. Heartstorm made sure Silverdrop was settled, said hello to the kits then promised to bring Silverdrop something to eat.

"I can get my own food thank you very much!" Silverdrop said slightly breathlessly but still seemed grateful. Heartstorm slipped out of the nursery.

"I need to talk to Reedpelt," said Deerflame, flashing a smile at Eelfrost and Heartstorm. Eelfrost stared back nervously. They watched her pad away towards her father.

"They're going to talk about me!" whispered Eelfrost. "I know it!"

"How do you know?" Heartstorm questioned.

"Deerflame told me that Reedpelt was asking about *us*," Eelfrost told Heartstorm. "I hate it. Every time I see him, I know he's thinking about me being his daughter's mate."

"That's good, isn't it?" Heartstorm said. Eelfrost frowned.

"No it's not! It's awkward and scary and I know he's judging me!" Eelfrost retorted. "He's the deputy!"

"Well, don't worry about it," sighed Heartstorm. "I said I'd get Silverdrop something." He headed for the fresh-kill pile and picked up a chubby vole. Eelfrost dragged behind him, glancing nervously at Deerflame and Reedpelt. Heartstorm trotted towards the nursery, poked his head in and saw Silverdrop, resting with her eyes closed. He smiled blissfully. He didn't want to wake her. Acornheart was awake though, watching her kits scrambling around her.

"Do you mind giving this to Silverdrop when she wakes?" asked Heartstorm. "Or I can just come back later."

"don't worry," Acornheart said. "I've got nothing else to do." Heartstorm thanked her, passed her the vole and trotted out to Eelfrost once more. He was biting his lip nervously. Heartstorm sighed.

"Don't worry about it," Heartstorm told Eelfrost. "I'm going to my nest." Eelfrost followed him, hiding behind Heartstorm as they passed Reedpelt and Acornheart. Heartstorm slipped into the warrior's den with Eelfrost. Eelfrost returned to his nest, lost in his thoughts. Sparkbelly trotted in, seeming happy about something. He spotted Heartstorm and headed for him.

"Guess what?" he whispered furtively. Heartstorm looked up and raised an eyebrow. Sparkbelly had always been nice to him, although he was slightly clueless at time, Heartstorm did like Sparkbelly to some extent. Heartstorm saw out of the corner of his eye, Eelfrost sitting up, listening intently.

"What?" Heartstorm answered.

"I'm over Deerflame!" exclaimed Sparkbelly. No surprise.

"Really?" Heartstorm said, pretending to be surprised. Eelfrost snickered from the corner of the den and Heartstorm turned

his laugh into a cough. "How come?"

"I think I'm in love with Rosebriar now," Sparkbelly confessed. "She's so beautiful..."

"That's what you said about Deerflame. And Silverdrop, come to think of it," pointed out Heartstorm. He was pretty sure Rosebriar wouldn't want Sparkbelly as a mate. If she hadn't changed from when she was a kit, he knew that she was authoritative, strong and loved to talk. She would surely chose a warrior who was as strong as her. Not a joker.

"Look, I don't think she's right for you," Heartstorm said honestly. Sparkbelly looked crestfallen.

"But she talked to me!" he exclaimed. Heartstorm raised his eyebrows.

"Mmmm," he said thoughtfully. "Don't you think that's maybe because you're in the same Clan?" Sparkbelly thought for a moment, frowning deeply.

"B-b-but...," he stammered. He hung his head and slunk out. Eelfrost burst out laughing from the corner. Heartstorm rolled his eyes. Although he did see the funny side of Sparkbelly's love life, he felt bad for Sparkbelly and did want Sparkbelly to find the right cat one day. Just then, there was a shriek.

"Frogleap!" Acornheart's voice rang out loud, clear and panicked. Heartstorm's heart lurched and he stumbled up form his nest. Cats were standing up, starting to gather around the nursery. Frogleap sprinted towards the nursery.

"What is it?" yelled Reedpelt, appearing in the crowd. Heartstorm pricked his ears, listening carefully, his stomach making worried flips.

"Silverdrop's kitting early!" came Acornheart's hurried reply.

Ch. 53

Worry and fear was biting at Heartstorm. He paced outside of the nursery, breathing hard. His thoughts were muddled up. He wanted to burst into the nursery. His stomach didn't feel so good either. He wanted to throw up. He could hear Silverdrop panting and crying softly from inside the den. Heartstorm's heart hurt. He couldn't concentrate on anything but Silverdrop and his worry. She had to be fine. She needed to be ok. He tried to control his breathing. He paced back and forth faster. A small cry came from the den. Heartstorm's heart lurched. Frogleap was talking quickly. Heartstorm couldn't leave Silverdrop. He couldn't...

"Heartstorm, get in here," barked Frogleap. Heartstorm stumbled into the nursery, his eyes wide. He wished he could take all of Silverdrop's pain away. His eyes adjusted to the gloom and he saw Silverdrop. Her fur was sleek, wet with sweat and her eyes clutched tightly. Acornheart had abandoned her kits to the side of the den to crouch by Silverdrop's side, whispering things into her ear. Frogleap was telling her to push, standing by her stomach. Heartstorm crouched near to her, his eyes brimming with tears. He gave her a small lick on the cheek. She didn't flinch. Her breathing was quick and rapid.

"Silverdrop? It's me, Heartstorm," whispered Heartstorm. He glanced at Frogleap expectantly. "Is she going to be alright?" Frogleap sighed.

"She's very weak. Apparently she went out today. Why didn't you stop her? It's made her weaker," Frogleap said with a shake of the head. Heartstorm felt faint.

"But she's going to be alright..., right?" Heartstorm mumbled. The world seemed to be spinning. He couldn't think about anything but Silverdrop. She couldn't leave him. She had to be alright.

"I'm sorry, but I called you in here to.., talk to her.

Encourage her," Frogleap said. "She... might not make it." Heartstorm was faint. He steadied himself. His heart was slowly breaking. She couldn't die. He couldn't live without her.

"Silverdrop. Silverdrop," Heartstorm murmured into her ear. "Please, please don't leave me. Silverdrop... don't leave me. I can't- I won't be able to live without you." Silverdrop shuddered and her eyes opened. Heartstorm's heart leaped. Her eyes were unfocused though.

"H-heartstorm?" she stammered hoarsely.

"Yeah yeah, it's me," Heartstorm urged. "You're going to be fine." She grunted.

"Silverdrop. Push," he ordered. Silverdrop didn't seem to register what he said. Then Frogleap gave a cry.

"It's the first one!" he said. Heartstorm's heart raced.

"Ow," moaned Silverdrop. Heartstorm could have laughed with relief as she sat up slightly. "It hurts like- oh.." Silverdrop whimpered in pain.

"Silverdrop, bite onto that branch," Frogleap ordered. Acornheart pushed a small branch to Silverdrop. She bit onto it. Heartstorm watched in horror and fear, not daring to hope.

"Good job Heartstorm. It seems you gave her the strength to fight," Frogleap said. Then the first kit was born. Heartstorm's heart gave a small cry of joy. He crept to the kit and Frogleap told him to lick it. He gladly did. It was so small, helpless, crying out silently but Heartstorm felt his heart bursting with love for it already. He brought it to Silverdrop's face. Her eyes lit up slightly then she started to cry in pain once more. Heartstorm's heart dropped once more. Silverdrop didn't seem like she was going to make it. He kept licking the small kit, wriggling at his feet lovingly.

"The second one's coming!" Frogleap reported. "Silverdrop. Fight it!" Heartstorm nodded numbly, staring into Silverdrop's brilliant blue eyes. They were still sparkling as she looked at the kit

but there was pain beneath it.

"I wish I could go through it instead of you," murmured Heartstorm. "Silverdrop. Don't leave me. Don't leave us." Heartstorm glanced at the kit, his heart swelled with love. His and Silverdrop's kit.

"Is she going to be ok?" asked Heartstorm.

"She seems better now," Frogleap said. Heartstorm didn't feel very reassured. Frogleap didn't seem too hopeful either. Silverdrop seemed to be losing life with each breath. Heartstorm didn't know how he was going to live without her. He looked down at his kit, promising himself he would never abandon it, love it forever.

"Silverdrop hold on now," Frogleap said gently. "The other one's coming." Silverdrop gave a small gasp and a sleek kit slipped down onto the soft sand. Frogleap passed it to Acornheart who already knew what to do. Heartstorm's heart gave another small jump of joy and happiness.

"Good job Silverdrop. You did it," whispered Heartstorm. "Be strong."

"If- I don't make it," she said with difficulty, her eyes pained. "Take care of them.." Heartstorm shook his head.

"No no, you're going to make it," he said. "Please make it. Don't do this to me. Please.." Silverdrop closed her eyes. Frogleap did everything he could, forced her to eat herbs, tried to massage her, helped her to get the last kit out... but he seemed less hopeful every second.

"Silverdrop, there's a last one," Frogleap told Silverdrop. "You're going to make it. You're going to have kits and you're going to raise them. Just hold on a little more." Heartstorm wished more than anything he could do something for Silverdrop. He couldn't go through losing Silverdrop. That was something he couldn't do. Silverdrop gave a small moan and didn't move. After a few tantalising moments, the last kit arrived. It was smaller and frailer

than the other kits and Heartstorm immediately felt a swell of love for it. Frogleap passed it to Heartstorm. Silverdrop lay still, not making a noise.

"Is she going to be alright?" Heartstorm's voice cracked. Frogleap checked her over.

"She's strong," he said. "She just came back from the brink of death. She must really love you."

Ch. 54

Heartstorm lay beside Silverdrop. She was weak but was able to sit up leaning on Heartstorm. They watched their kits as they suckled on milk. The smallest one was weak and barely moved. Frogleap had tried to give it everything to keep it strong but in the end, it depended on how strong it was. Heartstorm was filled with relief when Frogleap padded out, saying that was all he could do and that Silverdrop just needed rest. She was breathing gently, much calmer. Heartstorm saw her eyes trained on the kits.

"They're... beautiful," she croaked.

"Yeah," echoed Heartstorm. "You did it. I'm so glad. Thank you from coming back. Thank you for not leaving me." Words couldn't explain how relieved Heartstorm felt. He could only worry about the smallest kit even it seemed to be getting on well enough.

"You- I couldn't leave you," Silverdrop gulped. "I couldn't leave you and the kits." Heartstorm closed his eyes, taking deep breaths. He told himself it was over. There was nothing to worry about anymore. Silverdrop was fine and they had three kits. He knew the kitting had not gone as it had for Acornheart and Cloudbreeze, he knew for them it had gone smoothly compared to Silverdrop but Heartstorm was thanking StarClan for everything.

"What are we going to call them?" asked Silverdrop.

"You name them," Heartstorm urged. "It's your choice." He studied the kits. There was one she-cat and two toms. The she-cat was white with a few patches of light grey. The smallest tom was white and the last kit... Heartstorm's choked. The last kit..., looked exactly like him with a small grey mark on his shoulder. He threw his head back.

"What's wrong?" asked Silverdrop, staring at the kits with love.

"The tom, he looks exactly like me... like the cat in your dreams. The one fighting Blizzardkit," Heartstorm whispered. Silverdrop's eyes went wide. She hung her head.

"We don't know...," she murmured. "We don't know that- that he's going to fight Blizzardkit." Heartstorm was sure that it would happen. He was sure his kit was in danger but didn't want to worry Silverdrop. She didn't deserve it. She had gone through so much already.

"Yeah, of course not," Heartstorm said in the most controlled voice he could. "What do you want to name them?" Silverdrop's mind was off the dreams about their kit and Blizzardkit and was distracted with naming them. Heartstorm was glad as he didn't want her to worry any more than she should. He tried to push the bad thoughts away but he knew there was something awful in store for his kits.

"The one that looks like you," Silverdrop said, tilting her head, "I want to name him Bumblekit." Heartstorm was filled with a warm feeling.

"That's perfect. It fits him," he breathed.

"Do you want to name the she-cat?" asked Silverdrop gently, gazing at her kits in love. Heartstorm felt his heart bust with love looking down at his kits and Silverdrop. He had never felt more happy than this. Although the bad thoughts of Silverdrop's dreams and ShadowClan lingered in his mind, he couldn't concentrate on them anymore. This was a happy moment, nothing could ruin it.

"Can we name her... Brightkit?" whispered Heartstorm.

"Of course," nodded Silverdrop. "Bumblekit and Brightkit. How about the last one?"

"I don't know... he's so small but he looks like a fighter," Heartstorm said. "I know he'll become a strong warrior one day." Silverdrop smiled proudly.

"How about Sagekit?" suggested Silverdrop. Heartstorm knew that was the perfect name. He stared down as Sagekit grappled for food and Bumblekit gave a small meow. Brightkit was suckling quietly.

"Sagekit, Bumblekit and Brightkit," Heartstorm said. "Our kits." Silverdrop smiled and Heartstorm practically felt her love and warmth radiating around him. It was so calm, perfect, resting with his mate and kits. There was nothing to worry about. Not even the bad dreams Silverdrop had. Heartstorm's heart seemed to dance when he thought about his kits, his family. He had a family! His own family! He wanted to dance for joy. Silverdrop glanced at Acornheart. Acornheart was nestled next to her kits and smiled at Silverdrop.

"How are you feeling?" asked Acornheart.

"Great. You never told me how great it was to have kits," Silverdrop breathed.

"Words can't describe it. You have to feel it for yourself," replied Acornheart with a smile, she glanced down fondly at her kits. Heartstorm nodded in understanding. "What are their names? Have you chosen?" Heartstorm let Silverdrop answer. He felt as if he was going to burst with pride as Silverdrop nodded to each kit.

"This one is Bumblekit, doesn't he look like Heartstorm?" beamed Silverdrop. Acornheart cooed.

"He does!" she exclaimed. "He's so handsome!" Heartstorm could have blushed.

"And this is Brightkit," Silverdrop tilted her tail at the small she-cat nestled at her stomach. "Named in honour of Heartstorm's mother." Acornheart smiled understandingly.

"And that's little Sagekit," finished Silverdrop, gazing fondly at the small white kit.

"He's beautiful. His fur....," Acornheart said. "Congratulations, Silverdrop, Heartstorm. They're three beautiful

kits for RiverClan." Heartstorm was going to burst with pride. Then Frogleap bustled in.

"Is the small kit ok?" he asked. He stared at it. "Mmm, it's not very strong."

"*It*," Silverdrop said, "has a name. Sagekit."

"Ah, good name," nodded Frogleap. "Mmm, seems slightly week. There's nothing I can do though. Take good care of *Sagekit.* There's nothing I can do. Just feed it a lot of milk. Do you think you're strong enough for visitors? There's like a line outside. Everybody is talking. Driving me mad. I could shout at them to go away if you like." Silverdrop chuckled and Heartstorm couldn't help but roll his eyes at Frogleap. Frogleap narrowed his eyes.

"I'm serious, I'd gladly yell at them to leave," Frogleap assured them.

"Ah, it's alright," Silverdrop said. "You can let them in." Frogleap sighed, seeming disappointed.

"Right, one by one," they heard him snap from outside. Heartstorm chuckled. "And not more than one minute! Or I'll make you guard Cinderstar till you become elders." Using Cinderstar to threaten other cats was Frogleap's new and very efficient way of getting cats to do whatever he wanted. *Nobody* liked guarding her and everybody knew Frogleap would gladly put them on duty with Cinderstar for moons if he liked. The first to come in was Deerflame. She had had a hurried whispered argument with Eelfrost about who went in first but finally, Eelfrost relented. Deerflame's eyes lit up at the sight of the new kits.

"Ooh Silverdrop! They're gorgeous," she said, her heart melting. "Congratulations! This is great! Oh StarClan! They're so cute. What are their names?" Heartstorm beamed at Deerflame. Silverdrop nodded for Heartstorm to introduce the kits first.

"This is Sagekit," Heartstorm tipped his tail at the smallest kit. Deerflame gave a small cry and her eyes shone. "And Bumblekit."

"He's exactly like you!" exclaimed Deerflame.

"And this is Brightkit," finished Heartstorm.

"After your mother I presume," nodded Deerflame knowingly. "Nice choice. She's going to be a great RiverClan warrior."

"Deerflame!" came an annoyed voice. Eelfrost. Deerflame huffed, rolled her eyes, congratulated Heartstorm and Silverdrop one more time and padded out. Eelfrost burst into the nursery and his eyes flew wide.

"Blimey!" he exclaimed, looking speechless. "I didn't- I didn't believe it was true."

"You think my cries were pretend?" teased Silverdrop but Heartstorm didn't find it funny.

"No, they seemed real enough but- blimey, Heartstorm, this- this is great!" Eelfrost stammered. Heartstorm smiled, never having seen his friend so tongue tied.

"This is Brightkit," Silverdrop said. "Sagekit and Bumblekit."

"Woah," Eelfrost couldn't manage to say another word but just goggled at the kits. Heartstorm just smiled, he was happy, nothing would making him stop smiling.

"Eelfrost, get out!" came Frogleap's voice. Eelfrost padded out, looking bewildered. Next came Thornstar. He smiled at the sight of the kits and Heartstorm could help but straighten up. He was delighted that the leader had come to see his kits!

"Congratulations Silverdrop and Heartstorm. I heard about the trouble Silverdrop but you are strong and I am so happy that you made it through. Your kits are beautiful," Thornstar dipped his head. His eyes seemed to be sparkling at the sight of new kits. He even seemed proud. "RiverClan welcome these kits. Have you named them?"

"Yes, this is Sagekit," began Heartstorm.

"And Bumblekit and Brightkit," Silverdrop finished.

"Welcome to RiverClan," Thornstar said, bending down to the kits, "Brightkit, Sagekit and Bumblekit." Heartstorm beamed as Thornstar backed out of the den. Next Reedpelt came in then Softcry, Embergaze, Rainfeather, Sparkbelly and Hawkflight. Hawkflight was beaming from ear to ear when he had seen the kits and Heartstorm was more glad than anything to see him. He was so proud of Hawkflight. Hawkflight had been like his kit. Apprenticing him had been the best times in Heartstorm's life. Finally, Frogleap burst into the den, scolding other cats as they tried to peer in. Heartstorm's cheeks were burning from smiling but he couldn't stop smiling.

"Right, time to rest," Frogleap told Silverdrop. He checked her once more, giving her some herbs for strength then checked Sagekit. He pursed his lips but didn't say anything bad about Sagekit's condition. He then told Heartstorm firmly it was time for him to go. Heartstorm didn't want to leave. He wanted to stay with his kits and Silverdrop. She still seemed fragile and weak.

"Frogleap," began Heartstorm. Frogleap gave him and undeterred look.

"No protests. I've heard it all before," he told Heartstorm. "Please save me the trouble. Now go. Silverdrop needs rest."

"I know. That's why-" Heartstorm explained.

"I'll be with her. Now leave," Frogleap said, narrowing his eyes. Silverdrop cleared her throat and Heartstorm turned to her hopefully.

"You don't mind me staying with you, do you?" Heartstorm asked.

"Silverdrop, you know you need rest," Frogleap said warningly. Silverdrop sighed.

"You'll get to see the kits tomorrow, look, they're sleeping,"

Silverdrop said softly. She smiled at Heartstorm. "You need to rest as well." Heartstorm saw sense in Silverdrop's words..., like everything she said.

"Fine," he huffed. He glared at Frogleap, gave Silverdrop a small lick on the cheek and bent down to the sleeping kits. "Goodnight, Bumblekit, Sagekit and Brightkit." He smiled at his kits and Silverdrop, glared at Frogleap once more and trotted out of the den. Even though he had been chased out by Frogleap, Heartstorm felt light and giddy with happiness. This was the happiest day of his life, the day his kits were born.

Ch. 55

Heartstorm sprung up. He leapt over sleeping warriors and burst out of the warrior's den. The sky was covered in clouds and it was raining lightly. Heartstorm didn't care. Nothing was going to spoil his mood. He spotted Cloudbreeze by the camp entrance. Cloudbreeze smiled at him and joined his side. Heartstorm headed for the nursery, his head spinning with joy and happiness to see Silverdrop and their kits.

"It's great, having kits, isn't it?" Cloudbreez remarked.

"It is," nodded Heartstorm.

"Daisykit has started to open her eyes," Cloudbreeze told Heartstorm. "They're still blue but I think they're going to be just like mine when they turn to their real colour. I think Heatherkit's eyes will be just like Acornheart's." Heartstorm nodded, thinking about his kits' eye colours. He trotted into the nursery, followed by Cloudbreeze. Silverdrop looked up. She smiled at him. He padded to her side and settled down beside her. Bumblekit was crawling about, trying to get more milk. Sagekit was sound asleep and Brightkit was moving about, trying to find the right position. Heartstorm studied Silverdrop. She looked tired but much stronger than she had the day before. He sighed in satisfaction and turned his attention to the kits.

"They're so cute," whispered Heartstorm, mesmerised. They were his kits. He'd protect them no matter what. He'd love them no matter what. Silverdrop smiled blissfully, leaning her head to Heartstorm's shoulder. She closed her eyes. Heartstorm watched the kits. He loved the peaceful atmosphere in the nursery. Cloudbreeze and Acornheart were talking while Daisykit meowed for food.

"Frogleap said that, although they were born early, they're healthy. Except... Sagekit... He said Sagekit might have.. trouble doing certain things," Silverdrop whispered into Heartstorm's ear. "But I don't care. I'll love him no matter what."

"I know, me too. Nothing will change it," Heartstorm agreed. Silverdrop's stomach gave a small grumble.

"I'll get you some food," Heartstorm said immediately. Silverdorp opened her mouth to protest. "Don't. You're too tired and you know it." Silverdrop closed her mouth once more and the look she gave Heartstorm was full of love and gratitude. Heartstorm smiled softly, stood up and slipped out of the den. The day was grey outside. Water splattered at Heartstorm's pelt. He shivered and fluffed out his fur. Ugh, rain. He hated rain. He padded towards the fresh-kill pile, avoiding mud. Not many other cats had woken up. It was almost dawn and Heartstorm only spotted the shape of two cats by the camp entrance. Heartstorm dug through the fresh-kill pile. There was only a pigeon, two mice and a vole. Heartstorm picked the pigeon as Silverdrop had already eaten vole the day before and the mice were scrawny and skinny. Heartstorm decided he had to go hunting later on to fill the pathetic fresh-kill pile. He trotted back to the nursery, shaking himself dry outside. He slipped inside and dropped the pigeon by Silverdrop's side. She thanked him and nibbled at the food. Brightkit awoke at the smell and started meowing for food. Heartstorm nudged her closed to Silverdrop so she could suckle on milk.

"I'm going to need to go hunting later. The fresh-kill pile is practically empty. No way it's going to feed the whole Clan," Heartstorm told Silverdrop. She nodded understandingly. "you'll be fine without me, right?"

"Don't worry, I made it the night without you," said Silverdrop playfully. "I'll be fine." Heartstorm nodded. They talked in hushed tones as Sagekit and Heatherkit were still sleeping. Finally, Heartstorm heard the rain outside stop.

"I think I should go hunting now. I'll bring you something," Heartstorm told Silverdrop, getting up.

"I'm fine. I'm full," Silverdrop assured Heartstorm.

"We'll share something," Heartstorm insisted. He bent down, gave a small lick to each of his kits, gazed at Silverdrop fondly and walked out of the nursery. The sky was still downcast and it felt

cold but at least it had stopped raining. Heartstorm gratefully headed for the camp entrance. He didn't want to go on a hunting patrol. He'd hunt for himself, Silverdrop and the Clan. He slipped out. The air was fresh and the ground wet. Heartstorm headed through the forest, staying alert for food. He stayed away from the river. He didn't want to go swimming in this weather and he didn't like the idea of getting wet right now. As Heartstorm hunted for prey, all he could smell was the aftermath of rain. He sighed, remembering what Brightheart had said. Rain was a new beginning. It gave life to plants... He understood why rain would be good in that sense but... rain was still annoying. Suddenly, Heartstorm heard some fluttering. He crouched immediately, glancing around attentively. He spotted a crow, pecking the ground. Heartstorm slowly crept towards the crow. He was focused on the bird. He finally thought he was near enough. He made sure he was ready and pounced. He caught the bird easily in his claws. He snapped its neck and quickly buried it under a tree. He sighed in satisfaction. A nice plump crow. He hunted for more prey till he had a pigeon, two voles, a mouse and a lizard. Heartstorm stared at the limp lizard on the ground. It was twisted in a strange way. With a shrug, Heartstorm took his haul back to camp, happy to find Silverdrop once more. He slipped into camp, dropped his prey into the now empty fresh-kill pile. Reedpelt spotted him and smiled.

"Thank you," Reedpelt said. "I just made had to organise a hunting patrol." Reedpelt seemed very grateful as he padded away. Heartstorm beamed proudly, took the plump crow and trotted to the nursery. He knew Silverdrop had already eaten but maybe she was hungry. He sure was. His stomach grumbled to prove the point. Heartstorm slipped into the nursery. Acornheart was licking her kits and Silverdrop was sleeping gently. Sagekit was wriggling around on the ground while Brightkit and Bumblekit were sound asleep. Not wanting to wake Silverdrop, Heartstorm dropped the crow, picked Sagekit up gently and settled down, letting Sagekit snuggle up to him. Sagekit stopped moving, settling down in Heartstorm's warm fur. Heartstorm watched Sagekit fondly. He took small bites of his crow. It was succulent and juicy. Just then Hawkflight poked his head into the nursery. He saw Silverdrop sleeping and lowered his voce.

"Hey," he smiled. "I thought I'd just like to see the.. um.. kits."

"Of course," exclaimed Heartstorm. Hawkflight smiled. He padded over and bent down to look at Sagekit.

"He's so cute," whispered Hawkflight. "His fur is so white!"

"I know, isn't he beautiful?" Heartstorm asked fondly.

"He is. And Bumblekit looks exactly like you! It's like scary but so cute," Hawkflight said. Heartstorm smiled. It was great to talk to Hawkflight again. Hawkflight was almost like his son or brother.

"Is Silverdrop better?" asked Hawkflight. "I heard she almost... didn't make it." Heartstorm shrugged, remembering the horrible feeling of thinking Silverdrop was going to die.

"Yeah... but she's better now," Heartstorm said bravely. Just then Frogleap appeared.

"Good morning - well, it's noon, Acornheart. And hello Heartstorm and Hawkflight. Silverdrop is resting, good," Frogleap noted.

"Hi," said Heartstorm warily. When Frogleap was around, it meant something was wrong.

"Don't worry, it's nothing bad, I just came to check on Sagekit and give him this poultice I mixed. And this," Frogleap said, pushing some leaves to Heartstorm, "is for Silverdrop. To get her stronger." Heartstorm nodded. He didn't really agree with Frogleap that it wasn't anything bad. Why did Sagekit need poultice?

"What's wrong with Sagekit?" asked Heartstorm.

"Well, he's smaller and weaker and as he was born early, he might have trouble... surviving," Frogleap put in lightly. "Here, feed this to him." Frogleap dropped some sort of weird mix of herbs at Heartstorm's feet. He grimaced.

"Thanks," he said through clenched teeth while Frogleap checked Sagekit.

"I'll be on my way then, goodbye," Frogleap said curtly and slipped out.

"I hope Sagekit gets better soon. And Silverdrop," Hawkflight said earnestly. "It was good talking to you. I'll come and see the kits again tomorrow." Heartstorm nodded gratefully as Hawkflight retreated out of the den. Heartstorm stared at Sagekit, sleeping peacefully. He didn't want to disturb him but Daisykit was wailing already because of the strong smell. Acornheart turned to Heartstorm.

"Feed it to Sagekit. It stinks but it'll be good for him," Acornheart told Heartstorm. "Frogleap is always right." Heartstorm huffed and slowly licked Sagekit till he awoke. He brought the poultice to Sagekit's mouth. Sagekit gave a small cough and turned away.

"He doesn't want it," Heartstorm said, mostly to himself.

"Of course he doesn't!" exclaimed Acornheart. "But he must eat it." Heartstorm nodded and tried to push the poultice gently into Sagekit's mouth. Finally, Sagekit started chewing, meowing pathetically. Heartstorm felt bad.

"Don't worry, you don't need to feel bad," Acornheart said, as though reading in Heartstorm's thoughts. "It's good for him, even if he doesn't like it." Heartstorm nodded numbly once again. Silverdrop was slowly waking and so were Brightkit and Bumblekit. They were already starting to meow for food.

"Oh what's that smell?" sniffed Silverdrop, slowly getting up.

"Poultice. Frogleap made it for Sagekit," explained Heartstorm. Silverdrop's face fell.

"Oh..," she trailed off. "Is he going to be fine?"

"I'm sure he is," Heartstorm assured. Silverdrop sighed and

Sagekit started to move towards her. Heartstorm picked him up gently and carefully placed him down next to Brightkit.

"Here," Heartstorm said, nudging the herbs to Silverdrop. "Frogleap said they're for you." Silverdrop eyed them.

"I'm fine, I don't need those herbs," she shrugged. Heartstorm frowned.

"You have to," he said firmly. "I'll tell him if you don't eat it! It's for your own good." Silverdrop rolled her eyes.

"You wouldn't dare!" she said incredulously. To prove his point, Heartstorm looked out of the nursery and yelled, "Frogleap!" Silverdrop jumped.

"Shut up!" Silverdrop said but sighed, gobbling up the herbs. She made a face and stuck her tongue out at Heartstorm. He didn't care, as long as he knew she was healthy.

"I smell crow," Silverdrop said. She spotted the half eaten crow on the ground. Heartstorm returned to it, offering some to Silverdrop. "I'm not hungry, thanks." Heartstorm finished the rest of the crow. He lay down on the soft sand, imagining being able to sleep there the whole night.

"Look!" cried Acornheart. "Daisykit is starting to open her eyes!" Heartstorm turned and saw Daisykit, her small eyes slowly blinking. Silverdrop smiled longingly.

"Her eyes are beautiful," said Silverdrop. They were, of course, blue. Heartstorm glanced at Heatherkit who was curled up next to Acornheart, sleeping. Daisykit and Heatherkit were slightly bigger than Brightkit and Bumblekit. They could scramble around, not really walking and could certainly cry out very loudly.

"I'm thirsty," Silverdrop said. She got up. Sagekit started to cry and Bumblekit wailed.

"Hey! Sit down," Heartstorm said. "I'll fetch you some wet moss." Silverdrop slumped down once more.

"Thanks," she breathed. She started to lick Sagekit clean while Heartstorm headed out to find some wet moss for his mate.

Ch. 56

After border or hunting patrols or a long day of warrior duties, Heartstorm would always find time to go see his beloved kits. He loved seeing them growing with each day. Now, Brightkit and Bumblekit had started to scramble about just like Heaterkit and Daisykit. Sagekit was the only one who mostly stayed at one spot. Brightkit, Bumblekit and Sagekit were a quarter moon and two days old, Heartstorm had been counting. He trotted towards camp after a border patrol. He had parted from the patrol on the way back to hunt for Silverdrop and himself. In his jaw, he clutched a robin. The air was cold and the ground frozen. The trees were bare and, Heartstorm knew, it was almost leaf-bare. Heartstorm ducked into camp and headed for the nursery. He burst in, dropping the robin at Silverdrop's feet and giving her an affectionate lick on the forehead. He looked down and saw Bumblekit, looking around his eyes wide open. Heartstorm's eyes went wide and he gave a small cry of surprise.

"He's opened his eyes!" exclaimed Heartstorm. Silverdrop beamed.

"I know!" she said. "Isn't it great?" Bumblekit looked around and meowed. Heartstorm beamed.

"Brightkit started to open her eyes as well!" Silverdrop told Heartstorm.

"Really?" smiled Heartstorm. "I should've been there."

"Don't be silly, you've been hunting for the Clan," Silverdrop said. "It's just as important." Heartstorm huffed, wanting to object. He stared at Sagekit.

"He hasn't moved much," Heartstorm murmured unsurely.

"Yeah.., I guess he's just tired. Frogleap keeps increasing the amount of poultice we give him," Silverdrop sighed. "He keep

saying Sagekit will be fine but something about his tone...." Heartstorm sighed and bent down to Sagekit, giving him a small lick. Sagekit didn't move. He just slept peacefully.

"Yeah, I guess he is tired," decided Heartstorm. He settled down next to Silverdrop.

"I'm worried though...," Silverdrop said finally. "About Sagekit." Heartstorm nodded. He had been thinking the same.

"I know but if there was something badly wrong with him, Frogleap would tell us," Heartstorm said confidently. "The poultice must be helping."

"Maybe you should ask Frogleap," suggested Silverdrop.

"I will," agreed Heartstorm. He stared at his son with worry. Sagekit started to scramble for food and Silverdrop delicately brought him closer to her. Heartstorm stood up, wanting to get answers from Frogleap as soon as possible.

"I'll go ask Frogleap now," he said. Silverdrop nodded gratefully, gazing at Sagekit lovingly. Heartstorm trotted out of the nursery towards the medicine den. He slipped inside, not even remembering that Cinderstar was there. She opened her mouth to say something but Heartstorm marched past her. A tired looking Embergaze was guarding Cinderpelt. There was no sign of Frogleap.

"Where's Frogleap?" asked Heartstorm.

"Dunno. Hasn't been in here for hours," huffed Embergaze, glad to talk to a cat which wasn't Cinderstar.

"Thanks," muttered Heartstorm and rushed out of the medicine den. He looked around for Frogleap. No sign of him in camp. Heartstorm headed for Deerflame and Reedpelt.

"Hey," smiled Deerflame.

"Hi," replied Heartstorm distractedly. "Reedpelt?"

"Yes?" nodded Reedpelt.

"Where's Frogleap? It's about Sagekit," Heartstorm said.

"Ah, yes," Reedpelt said, with a small frown. "He went out to get as many herbs as he could before they rotted." Heartstorm nodded his thanks and slipped out of camp. He looked for a trace of Frogleap but he didn't need to. Frogleap appeared, many herbs clutched in his mouth.

"Frogleap!" cried Heartstorm. "I need to ask you something, about Sagekit." Frogleap nodded and looked down at the plants and herbs clutched in his jaw. Heartstorm followed him into camp and waited as Frogleap entered the medicine den, to pack up the herbs. Frogleap poked his head out of the medicine den and flicked his tail. They walked towards the stream.

"Frogleap," Heartstorm said. "I want to ask you about Sagekit." Frogleap nodded.

"I know, I was meaning to talk to you about him," Frogleap said slowly. They stopped by the river.

"You keep.... *increasing*... the amount of poultice you give Sagekit," Heartstorm said carefully.

"Yes. You see Heartstorm, Sagekit was born early and- to put things simply- he is a runt," Frogleap said pointedly. Heartstorm's fur bristled when Frogleap said "runt". Sagekit was not a runt.

"Don't look at me like that," Frogleap said. "He is a runt, but I never said there was something bad about being a runt. I've had to given him some burnet, chamomile, heather nectar and lamb's ear. I would have given him poppy seeds but I do not believe in giving kits poppy seeds."

"But what's wrong with him?" asked Heartstorm. He had no idea what all the herbs did.

"He's- weak," Frogleap explained. "Especially since leaf-bare is approaching, he might be susceptible to illnesses."

Heartstorm frowned, getting more and more worried about little Sagekit by the moment.

"But what can Silverdrop and I do, then?" Heartstorm asked. "He won't... die, right?"

"No no," Frogleap said gravely. "If you both make sure he is warm, well fed and I keep giving him the poultice, he will not die. But..., it needs to be done." Heartstorm nodded, biting his tongue.

"T-thanks," he muttered.

"Go take care of him," Frogleap said. "Sagekit is a fighter, he'll make it."

Ch. 57

"Yes, Bumblekit!" exclaimed Heartstorm. "That's it!" Bumblekit was slowly pushing himself to his feet.

"I-I'm walking!" meowed Bumblekit. Heartstorm and Silverdrop's kits had just reached the age of one moon old and Bumblekit and Brightkit had started to talk. Sagekit mostly kept to himself, only talking to Heartstorm and Silverdrop. Brightkit tried to push herself to her feet, wobbling slightly. Heartstorm nudged her up slightly.

"You can do this," Heartstorm whispered. Silverdrop's eyes were bright.

"Come on Bumblekit! Come to me," Silverdrop urged. Bumblekit took a few steps before falling flat on his face. Silverdrop laughed good-heartedly and picked him up gently. Suddenly, Brightkit was up on her feet. Her face was lit with a bright smile.

"I'm standing!" she exclaimed. Heartstorm grinned, feeling extremely proud.

"Take a few steps!" said Heartstorm. "I'm so proud of you!" Brightkit nodded and slowly walked towards Heartstorm, her small paws sinking slightly in the soft sand. Bumblekit stared at Silverdrop, his eyes had turned from a brilliant blue to a darker, more brownish colour although the blue could still be seen.

"Come on Brightkit! Bumblekit!" Heartstorm cooed. He turned to Sagekit, who was curled up, watching his siblings, not making a move. Bumblekit and Brightkit had grown a lot, and so had Sagekit, but he was still much smaller than his siblings. Heartstorm shuffled up closer to Sagekit who was regarding his siblings with interest.

"Don't you want to walk?" asked Heartstorm. "I know you can do it." Sagekit cocked his head.

"I don't want to... fall," admitted Sagekit softly.

"You won't fall!" exclaimed Heartstorm affectionately. "I'll be there to catch you." Sagekit hesitated but seemed to feel better. Silverdrop smiled at them.

"I know you can do it Sagekit. You're very strong," she beamed. Sagekit beamed back.

"Come on, it's no good not trying," Heartstorm pressed. Sagekit sighed and took a deep breath. His feet trembled as he tried to prop himself up. Heartstorm took his scruff gently and picked him up. Sagekit slowly managed to hold himself up. He didn't cry out excitedly though. He was totally concentrated. Slowly, he walked forward. Heartstorm stood beside him, ready to catch him if he fell. His eyes were blazing with pride. Soon, Sagekit was wandering about. Heartstorm smiled proudly as he saw Sagekit and Brightkit had managed to walk properly. Bumblekit could even manage to run but fell flat on his face after every few seconds. Bumblekit and Brightkit joined Heatherkit and Daisykit who had learned to walk a few days before. Heartstorm watched with Silverdrop by her side and Sagekit huddled in the middle of them. Heatherkit and Brightkit were rolling about on the sand while Bumblekit and Daisykit were racing around the den.

"Sagekit, why don't you join them?" asked Silverdrop.

"I prefer staying with you," Sagekit answered. Heartstorm smiled.

"Sagekit, come with us!" exclaimed Brightkit, trotting to Sagekit. Heartstorm smiled and nudged Sagekit forward.

"Come on, Sagekit, noin her sister and Heatherkit," Heartstorm said. Silverdrop nodded. Heatherkit and Brightkit waited as Sagekit sighed and padded towards them. Silverdrop watched them play together fondly. Soon, Sagekit was smiling brightly as he leapt onto Heatherkit and they rolled to the ground where Brightkit sprang at them.

"I think Sagekit is getting much better," she said satisfied.

"Yes. He's seems very healthy," agreed Heartstorm happily. The air outside was cold but in the nursery, the air was warm and joyful. Just then, Sparkbelly poked his head into the den. He greeted the kits who scrambled towards him happily, showing off. Then he turned to Heartstorm and beckoned him.

"There's a border patrol. Do you want to join?" asked Sparkbelly. Heartstorm didn't. This was a happy day for his kits, Silverdrop and him. They had just learned to walk but he still had his duties to the Clan. He nodded, sighed, gave Silverdrop a small lick, said goodbye to his kits and followed Sparkbelly out. He talked to Sparkbelly excitedly about Brightkit, Bumblekit and Sagekit.

That night, Heartstorm curled up in his nest, feeling happy, thinking about his kits and Silverdrop. He fell into a blissful sleep to wake up in the middle of the night, feeling cold. Heartstorm was wet with sweat as he awoke, looking around the den in fear. Fear seemed to be crawling around him. Something wasn't right. He shivered. Memories flashed in his mind. Losing Briarkit. Losing Stormpelt. Losing Brightheart. He felt tears in his eyes and the world around him blurred. Then he thought of his kits. He stood up abruptly, almost toppling over into Cloudbreeze. He slipped out of the warrior's den, relishing the fresh air. He took deep gulps of the cold air. But still, something didn't feel right. Heartstorm frowned. He had to check on Silverdrop and their kits, just in case. As he neared the den, he heard some murmuring. He frowned and pricked his ears. He slipped into the den. And he knew something wasn't right. Silverdrop lay on the ground, Brightkit and Bumblekit sheltering at her side, their head buried in her fur. Frogleap was crouched next to Silverdrop. Acornheart regarded Heartstorm sadly, keeping her kits close.

"I'm sorry," she breathed. Heartstorm frowned. He felt his heart drop as Frogleap moved aside and Silverdrop looked away, her eyes wet with tears. He looked down and his whole world seemed to topple. His mind swirled. His body felt weak. There, on the soft sandy ground lay Sagekit, his body limp... Heartstorm slowly lowered himself to the ground. He approached Sagekit and licked him. He was cold, unmoving. Silverdrop gulped. Heartstorm crawled to Sagekit and picked him up. Wake up. Wake up, he

thought desperately. Sadness was creeping over his mind, like a curtain, blocking his thoughts. Sagekit couldn't be dead. No, not his little Sagekit. Not the cute Sagekit who had just learnt to walk. One moon old. He'd only been one moon old. Silverdrop gave a small sob. Heartstorm kept Sagekit by his side. Why had this happened? Not again. Heartstorm curled up in a ball.

"Heartstorm, I'm very sorry," whispered Frogleap finally. "We will mourn Sagekit's death." Heartstorm wasn't listening. He couldn't concentrate on anything. He could feel Silverdrop by his side. She was licking him, her tongue warming his body but not hid mind. His thoughts were terribly cold. He felt Bumblekit and Brightkit shuffled to his side, to comfort him but he couldn't concentrate on them either. He just felt numb.

"Heartstorm...," Silverdrop whispered, at lost for words. She couldn't hid the sadness from her voice either. "Sagekit..." Silverdrop's voice cracked and she leaned her head on Heartstorm. How could this be happening to him... again? Why did StarClan have to take his kit? His kit?! Sagekit... Why was StarClan so cruel. Sagekit had just been a kit. Only one moon old. He had only known life for a moon. Heartstorm was unaware as Reedpelt and Thornstar filed into the nursery.

"Sagekit," Frogleap whispered into Thornstar's ear. Thornstar lowered his head. Reedpelt stifled a small cry.

"Heartstorm, Silverdrop, we are so very sorry for your lost. RiverClan's lost," whispered Thornstar, although neither Heartstorm nor Silverdrop were listening. "He is with our ancestors. Sagekit rests in StarClan." Silverdrop caught the last sentence and whimpered.

"He wasn't even old enough to hunt!" she cried softly. Thornstar hung his head.

"We will give you time to mourn," Reedpelt managed to say, feeling the sadness of the den slowly creep through his fur. Thornstar and Reedpelt left. Heartstorm hadn't even realised they had come in. He was being drowned by desperation. How was he going to live? Knowing Sagekit wasn't with him. Nothing would

ever be the same without Sagekit. Nothing could be the same without him. They weren't a family without Sagekit. Bumblekit cried softly and curled up in Silverdrop's fur. Brightkit stayed by Heartstorm's side, burying her face in Heartstorm's fur, breathing heavily. Frogleap stayed by their side. Heartstorm slowly fell into the arms of darkness, his only thoughts were Sagekit. Sagekit was dead.

Ch. 58

The air was cool. Crickets chirped. A gentle breeze blew. Flowers swayed. The moon shone. Heartstorm slowly got up and looked around. He stood in the middle of long grass with beautiful flowers. He took a deep gulp of fresh air. Where was he? StarClan, of course. It was so calm. Beautiful. It was nice here. He didn't have to worry about his life. He wished he could stay here forever. He didn't want to face his life back at RiverClan. Face the death of Sagekit. His heart ached. He sat down and stared at the horizon. Then a beautiful cat appeared. She padded towards Heartstorm quietly. Heartstorm recognised her. It was Brightheart. Instead of welcoming her, he hissed.

"Why did you take him?" he cried, his voice cracked and he sat back down, shivering.

"Heartstorm," Brightheart said quietly.

"You took him! He was only one moon old! ONE MOON!" yelled Heartstorm, breathing heavily.

"Heartstorm, I'm so sorry for you loss," Brightheart said gently.

"You took him!" accused Heartstorm then more softly. "Why?" Brightheart sat beside Heartstorm.

"He wasn't well. He was weaker than the others. He wouldn't be able to live happily like that," Brightheart explained. Heartstorm leapt to his feet, lashing his tail and back away from Brightheart.

"He was getting better," growled Heartstorm. "He had just learnt to walk." Brightheart sighed.

"I need to show you something," she said.

"I don't want to see anything from you. I don't want to see you again," snapped Heartstorm. But he didn't mean it. Then the grasses

parted and Heartstorm frowned. A small kit pushed through the grasses. He's eyes were bright, his legs strong and he seemed healthy and happy. He scampered to Heartstorm and smiled at him. Heartstorm stood still, shocked. Unable to move. His mind swirled.

"Sagekit?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Hi Dad!" cried Sagekit. "Why are you sad? Please don't be sad!" Heartstorm forced a small sad smile. He glanced at Brightheart who was gazing at Sagekit with love.

"Hi Sagekit," murmured Heartstorm.

"It's nice here," said Sagekit. "I can even hunt!" Heartstorm watched, unable to say anything. At loss for words. He bent down and licked Sagekit warmly. Sagekit grinned up at Heartstorm.

"I can even swim and climb!" added Sagekit for good measure.

"That's- that's great," choked Heartstorm. He wanted to keep Sagekit by his side forever, never let him go. But Sagekit scampered away, playing in the long grasses. Heartstorm watched, tears brimming in his eyes. He closed his eyes. When he opened them, Brightheart was by his side once more, staring at Sagekit who was playing about in the grass.

"See how happy he is here? He can do anything. Nothing can stop him," Brightheart said. "He's better off here. I'm with him." Heartstorm could see that Sagekit was much happier. He really could do anything in StarClan but- but... Heartstorm wanted Sagekit back.

"He could be happy, just like this, in RiverClan," Heartstorm replied stubbornly. Brightheart sighed.

"I know it's hard for you. But you need to see he's happier here. Being smaller than the others won't stop him from doing what he wants," Brightheart said earnestly. Heartstorm didn't want to believe it. Sagekit could be just as happy in RiverClan.

"My own grandson," whispered Brightheart. Heartstorm let out a small laugh.

"He does seem happy," Heartstorm said.

"I know it's hard to accept," said Brightheart. She seemed to be thinking about something else. Heartstorm wondered if she was thinking about Stormpelt. "But you need to let him go." Let him go. How was he going to do that? He stared at Sagekit. He was rolling about, a flower in his unsheathed claws. Sagekit's happiness was all Heartstorm had ever wanted, wasn't it? And he was happy now. Heartstorm looked down and sighed.

"Yeah, ok, but take care of him, alright?" Heartstorm said, glancing at Brightheart. She smiled.

"Of course," she said. Heartstorm padded to Sagekit's side and bent down.

"Hey," he said softly. "Dad has to go for now. But your grandma, Brightheart will take care of you, alright?" Sagekit looked up, tilted his head but nodded.

"Ok, I'll see you later," he said sweetly.

"I-I'll see you," Heartstorm said slowly. He pushed back his sadness. "You have fun, ok?"

"Ok, I'll catch a mouse for you and Silverdrop. And I'll catch a pigeon for Bumblekit and Brightkit," Sagekit said. Heartstorm smiled and nodded.

"Yeah, that would be great, thank you," Heartstorm said, forcing the words out. Sagekit beamed.

"Bye Dad!" he squealed and ran away, through the green grasses. Heartstorm watched till the grasses grew still and there was no more sign of Sagekit.